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80th Birthday Tribute to Peter Katin

SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873-1943)
The Complete Preludes

PETER KATIN piano

1	**Prelude Op. 3 No. 2 in C sharp minor**	4:33
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2	No. 1 in F sharp minor	4:15
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5	No. 4 in D major	5:35
6	No. 5 in G minor	3:58
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10	No. 9 in E flat minor	1:48
11	No.10 in G flat major	4:09
	Preludes Op. 32	
12	No. 1 in C major	1:12
13	No. 2 in B flat major	3:29
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16	No. 5 in G major	2:58
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21	No. 10 in B minor	5:34
22	No. 11 in B major	2:28
23	No. 12 in G sharp minor	2:24
24	No. 13 in D flat major	5:16
	Total duration:	**79:10**

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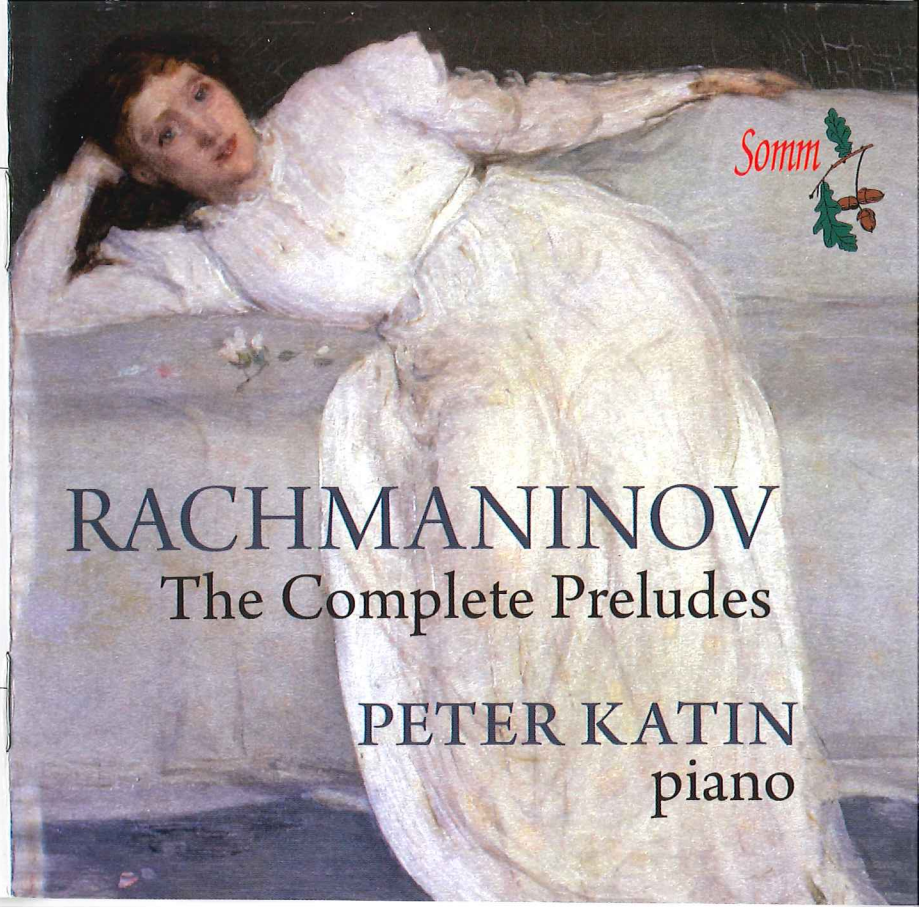
Design and layout: Andrew Giles



RACHMANINOV PRELUDES

Ever since the example of Bach's "48", many pianist-composers have felt the duty to create their own sets of Preludes across all the keys: Chopin, Scriabin, Shostakovich (who also appended Fugues, following Bach's template) – and Rachmaninov.

Rachmaninov's Preludes were composed during the middle years of his career, and gradually he accumulated the Holy Grail of all 24 (though he famously hated the early C-sharp minor Prelude, compelled to drag it round every recital as an encore, rather like Jacob Marley and his cash-boxes in A Christmas Carol).

This was almost a piecemeal completion of the set: the C-sharp minor of 1892 followed by a set of ten published in 1903 (though one had been composed in 1901), 13 in 1910; there was a solitary D minor Prelude in 1917.

With these preludes this great pianist was acknowledging a debt to the past. A few of them have become popular repertoire pieces (indeed, in the great film of *Dr Zhivago*, made nearly half-a-century ago, Ralph Richardson rails against the cacophony of Rachmaninov's G minor Prelude, which the young composer is playing at a reception).

Many of them, however, remain scarcely known to the listening public, and it is thanks to the devoted efforts of pianists as thoughtful as Peter Katin, renowned for his Chopin interpretations and equally at home with Rachmaninov, that we now have the chance to experience the many-sided world of the entire gamut of these miniatures, "small tone-poems" as Geoffrey Norris has described them.

C Sharp minor, Op. 3, No. 2
This Prelude has achieved quite undreamed of popularity, Rachmaninov himself being persuaded on countless occasions to play it as an *encore* at his recitals. He wrote it in 1892, soon after he had been awarded the gold medal at the Moscow Conservatoire. It is the second in a set of five pieces dedicated to his composition professor, Arensky. Sombre in mood, it makes use of a three-note figure (A – G sharp – C sharp) which is heard again and again. The series of chords at the end is very characteristic (we may be reminded of them when hearing the beginning of his Second Concerto); it is otherwise very simple in layout, with an agitated middle section employing four chromatically descending notes – another figuration with which Rachmaninov became increasingly associated.

Preludes. Op.23

F Sharp minor, Op. 23, No. 1
This is the first of the set of ten Preludes written between 1903 and 1904 and dedicated to Alexander Siloti, his one-time piano professor. It is a slow and mournful piece which moves with a kind of hopelessness through a succession of keys, every phrase of the theme starting with a long sustained note, such as Rachmaninov used in the seventeeth variation of the Paganini Rhapsody (42 years later). In the last line, both hands move together in a winding phrase down to F sharp and the tonic chord is played repeatedly, leaving a feeling of icy gloom.

B Flat Major, Op. 23, No. 2
A virtuoso piece of great flamboyance, superbly written with fanfare-like passages to thrill the listener on each repetition. The middle section brings cascades of double notes from the right hand while the left plays a sweeping melody of the kind in which an orchestra's cello section would revel. The return to the first section is heralded by a long downward scale and the coda is one of tremendous jubilation.

D minor, Op. 23, No. 3
I must confess that the more I play this Prelude the more amusing I find it is. Its pompous minuet theme is constantly subjected to ribald comment from the left hand, and even more lyrical passages are interrupted by downward *staccato* figurations which sound suspiciously like laughter. I have been told that bitter sarcasm might be a more accurate view of the music, but this doesn't help and I continue to believe that Rachmaninov wrote the piece with tongue in cheek.

D Major, Op. 23, No. 4
D Major seems so right for the tender and unhurried flow of melody which, starting with a left-hand accompaniment in triplets, later adds above it a descant of great beauty. The music increases in intensity but even at its climax still maintains its essential serenity. On its last repetition the theme is played in chords, with single-note 'comments' in a higher register. Then the music relaxes more and more, suspends on an indecisive chord, and sinks to rest on a simple cadence, so effective in many of the Preludes.

G minor, Op. 23, No. 5
Another familiar Prelude, warlike and martial, which is severely rhythmical and progresses inexorably. An uneasy quiet is brought by the more reflective middle section, and towards the end the march becomes increasingly distant and finally seems to scatter into nothing with a quick ascending passage.

E flat Major, Op. 23, No. 6
In some of the Preludes I sense a certain influence of Chopin, whose music Rachmaninov held in great affection. There is certainly a resemblance in both theme and mood between this Prelude and the bridge passage in Chopin's last Nocturne, but even if I were hearing things that are not there it would remain one of Rachmaninov's most exquisite miniatures, a song without words if you like, in two distinct verses. In the second part a counter melody is heard, and of this sort of writing Rachmaninov was a master. The whole piece conveys a feeling of tranquillity not often encountered in his music.

C minor, Op. 23, No. 7
A turbulent rush of semiquavers leads us breathlessly from start to finish. Above and below, snatches of themes can be heard, despairing or menacing, frightened or frightening, the restlessness gradually mounting higher and higher to a scream which brings a final swoop from top to bottom of the piano, a succession of dramatic chords bringing the movement to a sudden and violent end in the major key.

A flat Major, Op. 23, No. 8
Now the mood changes yet again. This music is happy, effervescent, both hands competing in a melody that flows on and on like a running brook. The voices are accompanied by semiquaver passages that take the Prelude to the highest pitch of exultance, gradually to sink in a twilight of wordless peace.

E flat minor, Op. 23, No. 9
A restless fluttering, unsettled until the last three chords. It could be said that this is basically a study in double notes, and it is certainly difficult enough to be thought of in this way. Apart from this, I am again reminded of a similar under-current in Chopin's G sharp minor Study, or perhaps, because of its largely technical resemblance, of Liszt's *Feux Follets*.

G flat Major, Op. 23, No. 10
Rachmaninov ends this set of Preludes with one of the most charming, mostly based on an idea of only two notes, D flat and G flat. The left hand plays it first, accompanied by soft chords in the right hand, then it is incorporated in a duet which we later hear in a rather extended form. Even the beautiful closing section, with its widely spread chords, makes use of it, and after the left hand has had what we think is the final say, it is then heard in the last cadence. A nocturnal character is very much in evidence here, and this makes a most fitting end to ten pieces of great and underestimated diversity and invention.

Preludes. Op.32

The Op. 32 Preludes were written in 1910, only six years after the Op. 23 set, but the writing shows an unmistakable development, both technically and musically. Between the two sets he had produced the Third Concerto, the Second Symphony, the 15 songs of Op. 26 and the D minor Sonata, as well as his tone-poem "The Isle of the Dead", and two operas which seem relegated to obscurity. Clearly his style had matured considerably, and in these later Preludes there is no evidence of possible influence from other composers, the stamp being very much Rachmaninov's own.

C Major, Op. 32, No. 1
A very short and brilliant piece almost entirely in triplets. There is no theme as such, but cascades of harmonic progressions which finally gallop away to leave us with a short coda of quieter, bell-like chords.

B flat minor, op. 32, No. 2
A longer Prelude, centred round the rhythmic figure of a *Siciliana*, to which he also turns in some of the other Preludes. Indeed, as the music progresses this figure dominates more and more until its insistence becomes almost hypnotic. Perhaps the most curious thing here is that B flat minor itself is only to be heard in the last bars of the work – throughout the rest everything revolves about the dominant, which conveys a feeling of restlessness and foreboding.

E Major, Op. 32, No. 3
A brief flourish, then follow passages of great rhythmic energy, seemingly forming an elaborate introduction to an almost jazzy theme. This builds up irresistibly to its triumphant climax, then the revelry dances away into the distance, the staccato chattering gradually descending almost to the bottom of the keyboard.

E minor, Op. 32, No. 4
This is an extraordinary piece of music, sinister, terrifying. All through there are rumblings, eruptions, sudden cries of horror, and when the final tremendous accumulation of tension is unleashed, there is a headlong flight to destruction. It is written with such brilliance as to leave one in no doubt of Rachmaninov's supreme mastery in conveying a mood. Here he is conveying something very reminiscent of "The Bells" (written the same year) and thus of Edgar Allan Poe's poem:

Hear, oh hear the brazen bells,
The loud, the loud alarum bells!
In their sobbing and their throbbing
What a tale of terror dwells!
How beseaching sounds their cry
Neath the naked midnight sky,
Through the darkness wildly pleading
In affright,
First approaching, then receding,
rings their message through the night!

G Major, Op. 32, No. 5
Here is something quite different, a calm and beautiful song above a web of sound spun delicately in the left hand. There is a short excursion into the minor key, then we are back to the first melody, extended while it dies away and finally leaves us with a coda that floats its way to the end.

F minor, Op. 32, No. 6
Another stormy Prelude, very short, rushing here and there with a turbulent stream of triplets, sudden accents, and the short, abrupt exclamation which is to be heard at the beginning of the piece.

F Major, Op. 32, No. 7
To a delicate but rhythmic accompaniment which persists through most of the work both hands combine in a duet, wistful, serene and passionate by turns. This is like an improvisation; perhaps 'Impromptu' might be a good name for it.

A minor, Op. 32, No. 7
This is brilliant and toccata-like and above and below the constant semiquavers we can hear accented notes 'plucked' from the piano. The music becomes wilder towards the end, then scuttles away to nothing, a brief outburst ending with peace.

A Major, Op. 32, No. 9
Based on a very short and – by itself – undistinguished melodic figure, Rachmaninov turns it into something rather grand and noble by some very rich writing, with the bass wandering to and fro in octaves. At its highest point the character suddenly changes and a series of bell-like notes are heard through a running semiquaver accompaniment. A last crescendo of sound brings a left-hand scale down to the bottom note of the piano, and the Prelude ends with cool, peaceful chords.

B minor, Op. 32, No. 10
A mournful theme moves with a slow and sad dignity, later to build up to a massive peak accompanied by repeated and heavy chords. Then an insistent tolling is heard, becoming louder and louder until there is a sudden fountain of notes which gradually recedes towards the top of the keyboard, and the first theme is once again heard, sinking by degrees into darkness.

B Major, Op. 32, No. 11
Another Prelude employing the graceful *Siciliana* rhythm. This is a slight, relaxing piece which wanders here and there, stopping sometimes while we hear a distant right-hand chord in another dimension. Not progressing with any apparent purpose, this is music with a gently teasing charm.

G sharp minor, Op. 32, No. 12
Out of a whirlpool of notes comes a sad tenor theme, now hesitant, now impulsive. It is answered by the right hand, then it continues with a succession of four-note downward figurations, becoming increasingly intense until the original rhythm is heard *fortissimo*. As in so many of the Preludes, the last phrases scamper away into nothingness.

D flat Major, Op. 32, No. 13
A grave and dignified theme opens this massive work, and as it progresses we might hear hints of phrases from earlier Preludes. A duet, rising out of a murkiness in which may be detected a resemblance to the end of the B minor Prelude, takes the tension to a high point, from which an avalanche of notes tumbles right down to a thrillingly dramatic chord low in the keyboard. Then the stage is set for a last, enormously commanding statement of the first theme and an extended coda of overwhelming strength and triumph, a magnificently impressive ending to the whole set.

PETER KATIN

Peter Katin's career started in 1948 with a recital at London's Wigmore Hall which was so acclaimed that within a very short time he was regarded as one of the finest pianists of the postwar generation. At this time he also received invaluable advice from such artists as Claudio Arrau, Myra Hess and Clifford Curzon, advice for which he has always been deeply grateful.

Although his programmes were of a wide spectrum of works from early to contemporary, his greatest successes were in the more classical repertoire, two London performances of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto in G major proving landmarks in this respect. Yet only three years later his image changed almost overnight with a performance of the

Rachmaninov Third Piano Concerto in D minor at a Henry Wood Promenade Concert which almost stopped the show after nine calls, and for the next fifteen years he was looked upon primarily as a virtuoso and a leading player of the big romantic works.

In 1968 he withdrew most of these "warhorses" from his repertoire for a few years in order to concentrate on the impressionists. He also embarked on a study of Chopin, of whose works he is now regarded as one of the finest interpreters. In December 1977 he was presented with the Chopin Arts Award on the occasion of a New York recital, the previous recipient being Artur Rubinstein.

While following a worldwide concert schedule, Peter Katin's gifts as a teacher were recognized by his appointment in 1978 to the University of Western Ontario as Visiting Professor, a post involving his residence in Canada for a fair proportion of the ensuing six years, and his concert appearances were enthusiastically welcomed in Canada's major cities.

Peter Katin's art is perhaps best summed up in a New York Times review of 1984: "*Peter Katin, who played as exhilarating a recital as it has ever been this critic's privilege to hear, combines, superb technical fluency with an elevated sense of musical repose; his recital had neither a note out of place nor any display of ostentatious virtuosity.*"

As a tribute to Peter Katin on his 80th birthday this year, we have included an interview given by him to music critic and reviewer Colin Anderson. This appeared in the Summer 2011 issue of *Classical Recordings Quarterly* and is printed here in its entirety with Editor Alan Sanders' kind permission.

PETER KATIN AT 80

Colin Anderson has been to visit the pianist at his home on the South Coast.

CA: Were you born into a musical family?

PK: No. I have no idea where my love of music comes from, although I don't think it did until I was 18 or so.

CA: But you entered the Royal Academy of Music at the age of 12.

PK: Yes, they (my parents) pushed me in various directions that I didn't want to be pushed into.

CA: But something musical must have been happening to you at this tender age?

PK: You see I could play the piano, although I didn't know that, and there was a piano in the house, and I played tunes, which I could find on the piano. I went through the Associated Boards exams and got as far as Grade Seven. It was more a fascination because I found I could do it. I didn't have a lesson until I was six, with one of the locals.

CA: I get the impression that when you started at the RAM you were not sure why you were there?

PK: Exactly! It was Grade Seven that did it. It was Ernest Read who was the examiner. He was interested and he recommended me.

CA: It was the height of the War of course.

PK: Yes, I got a scholarship then, at the age of 12. There were loads of students at the RAM running about, depending on which way the bombs were going! I simply went from home for a weekly lesson. I was with Harold Craxton. He was dreadful. Everyone knows his name though. He was the senior teacher. He didn't inspire me.

CA: You made your Wigmore Hall debut at the age of 18. Can you fill-in what happened over those six years?

PK: It was decided for me. I did it. I enjoyed doing the Wigmore recital. There was some Mozart and Scarlatti, the classical repertoire. My father was very keen to read reviews. I did three recitals there in close succession, including the Liszt Sonata. It's so difficult! But I was so impressed by the music.

CA: Would it be fair to say though that you weren't hell-bent on being an international concert pianist?

PK: That's correct. I didn't know what an international pianist was!

CA You also appeared at the Proms shortly after?

PK: Yes, in 1952, the Tchaikovsky Second. I had to play the Siloti version; I didn't know about any other version. I had to see Sargent. He didn't know it and cut it further. At this time I made my first recordings for Decca, of Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsodies*, which I can't stand – Decca persuaded me to do them – they got marvellous reviews (LXT2971). The following year I played the Third Rachmaninov (with John Hollingsworth conducting). I didn't want to do it. I really wanted to play Beethoven's Second. Then the BBC saw the reviews and changed their mind about the Beethoven. I think the Rachmaninov was beyond me, but it went well, and exceeded my expectations.

CA: What was your experience of making your first record?

PK: It was in the Hampstead Studios. Well, I'd have enjoyed it far more if it had been something I liked. But I thought I had better do it. As I say, it got marvellous reviews, and I was asked to do more Liszt. I would have chosen some Beethoven sonatas; that's what I told them. The other thing that we argued about – and I lost – was to record Haydn sonatas, which I thought was a good idea. I was now beginning to have ideas of my own.

CA: Tell me something about the recording process in those days.

PK: Well I was stopped every time there was a wrong note. Stop and start. By the end of it I really didn't like the music. As time went on I got used to it and it didn't put me off recording.

CA: In 1958 you went to the Soviet Union.

PK: I was the first English pianist there since the War. Ibbs and Tillett arranged it, from an invitation to send a musician. I arrived in Moscow and I went all over the place; there were some horrible places ... everybody suffers! I wasn't aware of being under surveillance and I made a lot of friends there. They had to give me a visa for the Tchaikovsky Competition, which I wasn't going in for, but it was quicker to get a Competition Visa. I was there for six weeks and could play what I wanted. Some of the conductors were unpleasant and there was no time to build a rapport with them. They were good accompanists though and there was always a translator. It was quite an experience and a very exciting trip, and then I did another one.

CA: You had contact with Claudio Arrau, Myra Hess and Clifford Curzon. What are your memories of them?

PK: Quite vivid! I played for Myra privately. She was so savage. "Stop, stop, stop, I don't like that, play something else." I came away suicidal and felt as if I didn't have any talent; might as well get out now. I needed someone to drive and encourage me, and she wasn't doing that. I then played for Clifford. I was there for five hours. He said I had an infinite capacity. I played a Mozart sonata and *Mephisto Waltz*, which I had heard him play just a couple of weeks earlier. He encouraged me and became a friend. He was very talkative, much better off the stage than he was on it. He could put across ideas very lucidly. We used to have long conversations ... he was very interesting. Claudio I wanted to work with. When he said, "You must come and play for me", he meant it. So I spent an afternoon with him, and knew him afterwards as well.

CA: May we turn to the conductors you recorded with, such as Hugo Rignold and Eugene Goossens?

PK: I did a lot with Rignold in concerts, an awfully nice person. I didn't see Goossens very much, although we did a few concerts, but he was very good, I can't really say more than that; he was easy to work with.

CA: And with Sir Adrian Boult and Edric Cundell.

PK: Cundell was director of the Guildhall School, but he couldn't conduct! I recorded the First Tchaikovsky with him. I didn't feel he could conduct it, but Decca insisted, having heard us perform it in Bromley, but Decca employed people who didn't know anything about music. We had a piano rehearsal, which didn't go well. But he was very nice, and easy to get on with. The sessions were not good. It was the LSO, and in those days if the LSO didn't want to do something, they didn't do it. I did the best I could, and I was following him rather than him me. The producer said I wasn't playing in a Russian enough way. But I'm not Russian (SPA168). I remember speaking to Solomon about this, who said you shouldn't look to a producer as to how to play. Solomon was a big influence. And Malcuzynski. And Livia Rev – we both did our Wigmore debuts about the same time. We made contact recently again – now that's something computers can do for you.

CA: ...and Sir Adrian?

PK: Marvellous! He was extraordinary. He knew when to leave the soloist alone, and the orchestra, and he was an absolute gentleman in the way he spoke to the orchestra. In that long cadenza in the first movement of Tchaikovsky's *Concert Fantasia*, he announced to the orchestra that I had something almost unplayable to record and that they should wish me the best of luck (Decca SXL2034). The next day, when we did the second movement, the first thing he asked me was, "How did it go?". He was a fine musician and a good colleague.

CA: Do you enjoy recording for posterity, and do you have a favourite?

PK: I just get ideas, like doing all the Mozart sonatas and happened to have the right

label, Olympia (OCD230/34). I was particularly pleased with the Grieg *Lyric Pieces*, for Unicorn, recorded in Trinity School in Croydon (UKCD2033/5).

CA: Who of today's pianists do you like?

PK: I'd love to hear more of Paul Lewis.

CA: Who have been the most inspiring composers for you?

PK: Chopin is a favourite; one can spend hours studying him. I've recorded the *Nocturnes* several times. Debussy. Ravel. Some Liszt, but not necessarily the pieces I recorded! Beethoven. Brahms. I've never had a problem playing for an audience; they're there to be communicated to, that's the important thing – it's a two-way thing. I'm always telling younger pianists that. I'm someone else when playing, not the person I was backstage.

CA: I appreciate you'd rather not think about your eightieth birthday, but 60 years later what are your memories? Is Peter Katin a happy man?

PK: I tend not to think about the past, and the career just happened. Am I happy? Yes, I think so!

(*www.peterkatin.com*)