

RACHMANINOV

The Complete Preludes

LEON McCAWLEY
piano

SOMMCD 0143



DDD

1	Prelude Op. 3 No. 2 in C sharp minor	3:54		
Preludes Op. 23				
2	No. 1 in F sharp minor	3:14		
3	No. 2 in B flat major	3:34		
4	No. 3 in D minor	4:00		
5	No. 4 in D major	4:52		
6	No. 5 in G minor	3:52		
7	No. 6 in E flat major	2:54		
8	No. 7 in C minor	2:38		
9	No. 8 in A flat major	3:18		
10	No. 9 in E flat minor	1:59		
11	No. 10 in G flat major	3:34		
	Preludes Op. 32			
12	No. 1 in C major	1:17		
13	No. 2 in B flat major	3:14		
14	No. 3 in E major	2:23		
15	No. 4 in E minor	5:24		
16	No. 5 in G major	3:17		
17	No. 6 in F minor	1:24		
18	No. 7 in F major	2:21		
19	No. 8 in A minor	1:47		
20	No. 9 in A major	3:03		
21	No. 10 in B minor	5:30		
22	No. 11 in B major	2:06		
23	No. 12 in G sharp minor	2:31		
24	No. 13 in D flat major	5:04		
	Total duration	77:33		

Recorded at Champs Hill, Pulborough, West Sussex on 7 & 8 May 2014
Recording Producer: Siva Oke Recording Engineer: Ben Connellan
Piano: Steinway Concert Grand, Model 'D'

Front Cover Photograph: Leon McCawley. Photo by Anna Paik

Design and Layout: Andrew Giles

RACHMANINOV

The Complete Preludes

LEON McCAWLEY
piano



AT THE TIME of the marriage of Rachmaninov's parents in the 1860s their status was that of an upper middle-class family of comfortable means. Rachmaninov's mother, Lyubov, had brought five estates as a dowry and his father Vassily had served with distinction against the Caucasian rebels during the Dagestan campaign in 1857-59. In the Imperial Russian Army, however, the life-style of officers encouraged hard drinking, gambling and almost all other forms of licentiousness, and on leaving the army following his wedding, Vassily squandered the family's substantial resources on madcap business ventures. Within a dozen years of her marriage, Lyubov saw each of their estates sold off one by one, and in 1881 the family's last estate (where her son Sergei had been born on April 2nd, 1873) had to be sold, and the couple with their five children were obliged to move to an apartment in St Petersburg. No sooner had they arrived than a diphtheria epidemic claimed the life of their second daughter, Sophia. The strain proved too much for Vasily, who abandoned his family.

Lyubov managed to secure suitable schooling for her children, and the natural musical gifts which Sergei had already exhibited enabled him to obtain a scholarship to the St Petersburg Conservatory. But without parental control the boy fell prey to a life of indolence and truancy. After three years the game was up, and he was threatened with expulsion. In despair, Lyubov turned to her nephew, her sister's son Alexander Siloti, a fine musician who had recently returned from studies with Liszt. He agreed to hear Sergei play, and – by no means impressed – suggested that the only person who could help was his own teacher, Nikolai Zverev, at the Moscow Conservatory.

With Siloti's influence, Sergei was accepted as a Zverev pupil at the age of thirteen, half educated and lacking any systematic or thorough musical training. Yet within four years, he had graduated as a pianist with the highest honours, and a year later as a composer, awarded the Great Gold Medal of the Conservatory. He thus became

only the third recipient in the Conservatory's history, with the title 'Free Artist'. It had been an astonishing transformation.

During those few years with Zverev, Sergei had begun to compose original pieces, and – by the age of 18 – had written the first movement of a symphony, an opera, and the first version of his F sharp minor Piano Concerto among a number of solo piano pieces. He had met Tchaikovsky, and the older man did much to help the young musician's career, particularly with regard to the production of the opera – Aleko – and in Rachmaninov's negotiations with the music publisher Gutheil. However, Rachmaninov soon learned that a brilliant academic career does not automatically mean much when the young musician begins his professional life, finding that the necessity of earning a living had become a constant worry.

But as a supremely gifted pianist he could give recitals, and his professional career began on October 9th 1892 with an appearance at the Moscow Electrical Exposition. Although he had played publicly before, Rachmaninov always regarded this recital as his professional debut. His fee was 50 roubles, his programme including the first movement of Rubinstein's D minor Concerto with orchestra, and a short solo piece he had recently completed – a Prelude in C sharp minor. Thus it was that 19-year-old composer-pianist's professional debut coincided with the first performance of what was to become his most famous composition.

Whilst preparing for a concert at Kharkov, some 400 miles south of Moscow, three months later, Rachmaninov added four other short pieces to the Prelude, making a collection entitled *Morceaux de fantaisie*, which Gutheil published as his Opus 3 in February 1893. A week after Tchaikovsky received one of the first copies of the newly-published set, he wrote to Siloti, saying how impressed he had been with them, singling

out the Prelude in particular. It may not have gone unnoticed by Tchaikovsky that a tiny stepwise cell – the semitonal fall, or its extension the whole-tone step and its inversions – is heard at the beginning or every one of the five pieces.

But for Rachmaninov the success of the Prelude proved to be double-edged. On the one hand, the piece soon travelled throughout the world (being first published in Britain by Alfred Lengnick & Co in 1898) to the point where in the 1920s in New York Rachmaninov heard the Paul Whiteman band play a jazz version, which the composer enjoyed (he had a similar experience at the Savoy Grill in London), but on the other hand the universal popularity of the Prelude came to curse him, when, as a touring virtuoso, audiences would not let him leave without playing it as an encore.

In 1893, Russia was not a signatory to any international copyright agreement; all Rachmaninov received for the piece was the forty roubles Gutheil paid him, together with royalties from his subsequent recordings of it. But ten years after the *Morceaux de fantaisie* were first heard, much had happened in the young musician's personal and professional life. Following the disastrous premiere of his First Symphony (not the student work) under Glazunov in 1895, Rachmaninov gradually lost interest in composition, and it was only after receiving a course in hypnotherapy under Dr Nikolai Dahl in Moscow in 1900 that his muse returned. However, Rachmaninov's career as a conductor had developed greatly during this time, so his musical life was by no means barren. In 1901, after the appearance of three consecutive major works – the Second Piano Concerto, Second Suite for two pianos and Cello Sonata - his composing life was restored, by when his feelings for his cousin Natalia had also deepened. The couple were married in May 1902 – a marriage that, as so often happens with composers, led to a burst of creativity on his part, including the Ten Preludes for solo piano which comprise Rachmaninov's Opus 23.

These were written at the same time as his first extended solo piano work, the Variations on a Theme of Chopin Opus 22, the theme being the C minor Prelude from Chopin's Opus 28 set. Possibly the most famous Prelude in Rachmaninov's new set, No 5 in G minor, was composed in 1901. It does not require much imagination to feel that Rachmaninov, having begun the Variations, would be drawn to the work that sparked them off – a set of Preludes – and, having already written the G minor, would begin a new set of his own. The Moscow recital on 10 February 1903 in which Rachmaninov premiered his Opus 22 Variations also saw the first performance of three of the Opus 23 set – Nos 1, 2 and 5. The remaining seven were written in Moscow during the next few weeks as the couple awaited the birth of their first child in May.

The complete set of ten was published later that year and dedicated to Alexander Siloti (who had been one of the chief witnesses at the couple's wedding). Rachmaninov's Opus 23 set continues the cellular construction of his Opus 3 *Morceaux de fantaisie* but at a deeper level. Curiously, the stepwise motion that began the C sharp minor is common to all ten new Preludes – in the first four Preludes it falls; in the next four it rises, and in the ninth and tenth it does both.

With eleven Preludes having been written, it was surely only a matter of time before Rachmaninov would complete his set of 24 with a final group of 13. They comprise his Opus 32, and followed in 1910, when the composer was at the very height of his powers. Rachmaninov now found himself so much in demand as a pianist and conductor that relatively little time was available for composition. When opportunities arose for him to commit thoughts to paper, the resultant compositions were written very quickly. The final set of Preludes illustrates this situation clearly; three were written in a single day, and the entire set was completed within less than three weeks.

Doubtless as a consequence of this concentrated creativity, Rachmaninov's Opus 32 set is more organic, but it is curious to note how yet again the composer recalls the C sharp minor – the begetter of them all. In addition, he also uses cells from the first to be written, No 5 in G major, in the remaining twelve. The final Prelude, No 13 in D flat (enharmonically the relative major of the C sharp minor), quotes extensively from the earlier work but so subtly that listeners rarely identify from where the themes have come.

In spite of the rather haphazard manner in which Rachmaninov completed his set of 24 Preludes, the consistency of his compositional style (which is not to say it never altered, for it did – albeit subtly) ensures no stylistic mismatch when they are heard consecutively. The fact that he chose every key doubtless implies they can be played as a set (although Rachmaninov never did so in public), the connecting cells which unite them (as well as the C sharp minor – D flat major enveloping tonalities) reinforcing this view.

The opening stepwise motion acts as a unifying cell and as a launching-pad for each prelude, and a further example of Rachmaninov's organic approach can be cited in the G minor of Opus 23. Noting in passing that its own rising *gruppetto* in the bass is a variation on the intervals which begin the C sharp minor, it is placed between the slow No 4 in D major, which acts as a dominant, and the lyrical No 6 in E flat. This sixth Prelude's opening B flat and G are common to G minor, whose tonality can still be felt at the beginning of the E flat major if they are heard consecutively. These are a few of the characteristics linking these magnificent pieces which, like Chopin's, can be played individually. One stresses their unity because they are more often encountered separately, but hearing them in sequence demonstrates a rarely-perceived but always present aspect of this great composer.

Robert Matthew-Walker © 2015

LEON MCCAWLEY

English pianist Leon McCawley leapt into prominence when he won both First Prize in the International Beethoven Piano Competition in Vienna and Second Prize in the Leeds International Piano Competition at the age of nineteen in 1993.

Since then, McCawley has given highly acclaimed recitals that include London's Wigmore Hall and Queen Elizabeth Hall, Berlin Konzerthaus, Lincoln Center New York, Prague Rudolfinum and Vienna Musikverein. McCawley performs frequently with many of the top British orchestras and has performed several times at the BBC Proms at the Royal Albert Hall. He broadcasts regularly on BBC Radio 3 in recital and with many of the BBC orchestras. Further afield he has performed with Cincinnati Symphony, Dallas Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra, Netherlands Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra and Vienna Symphony among many others. Conductors he has worked with include Daniele Gatti, Paavo Järvi, Kurt Masur and Simon Rattle.

McCawley's wide-ranging discography has received many accolades including two "Editor's Choice" awards in *Gramophone* and a *Diapason d'Or* for his boxed set of The Complete Mozart Piano Sonatas and more recently, a *Gramophone Critic's Choice 2011* for his recording of Barber Piano Music for SOMM.

McCawley studied at Chetham's School of Music, Manchester with Heather Slade-Lipkin and at the Curtis Institute of Music with Eleanor Sokoloff. He also worked with Nina Milkina in London.

Leon McCawley is a professor of piano at London's Royal College of Music and is married to the painter, Anna Hyunsook Paik.

For more information, please visit www.leonmccawley.com