

RACHMANINOFF: *Early Piano Pieces*

Elisa Tomellini

Piano Classics 123—78 minutes

As a lifetime Rachmaninoff aficionado, I really appreciate this record. Besides the first-rate performances, not many of the pieces here are heard or recorded very often. Everything was composed 1886-94 by a young composer just beginning to find his voice. Notably absent from this collection are the five pieces from Op.3, which includes the famous Prelude in C-sharp minor. That opus gets performed and recorded often. I have only come across the 'Humoresque' (heard here in its 1940 revised version) and the 'Barcarolle' from the *Morceau de Salon* apart from recordings of the complete opus (Horowitz on RCA). The four-movement Suite in D minor (1890-91) is a piano transcription of an early orchestral work. It was only discovered in 2002 in a collection of Siloti's papers. This 20-minute work is well worth getting to know and has been recorded a few times before, but not as convincingly as here. The *Nocturnes* (1887-88) have been recorded many times since their first US publication in the early 1970s, but have never entered the mainstream of piano repertoire. Tomellini's interpretation might help remedy that situation. The same holds true for the Four Pieces Rachmaninoff originally considered for his Opus 1.

This disc is also part of Piano Classics 111, Rachmaninoff's Complete Piano Music [6CD]. Either way, it sheds new light on the composer's early piano music. When taken in this context, the Op. 10 pieces assume a significance not generally associated with them, and I can't recall enjoying these pieces more.

HARRINGTON

RACHMANINOFF: *Piano Sonata 1; Corelli Variations; 3 Etudes-Tableaux; 4 Song Transcriptions*

Sandro Russo

Steinway 30077—78 minutes

Russo has come my way before with Russian repertoire (Musical Concepts 150, N/D 2014). He is an exciting, very talented pianist, born in Sicily but a resident of the US since 2000. Now the Steinway artist has his first disc on that top label. As expected, it is generously filled, with excellent piano sound and good program notes. I have discs with just the sonata and Corelli Variations, but here we get an additional seven pieces—25 minutes more music.

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Sonata 1 is probably my favorite of Rachmaninoff's large piano compositions. It opened the composer's first solo piano recital at Carnegie Hall in 1909. Rarely heard 40 years ago, it is played and recorded much more often these days, but nowhere as often as Sonata 2. Without the benefit of a champion like Horowitz, and with a difficulty level comparable to Piano Concerto 3, this work requires a pianist with vast reserves of technique, power, and interpretive skill. Russo succeeds on all counts. He doesn't knock Ogdon (RCA) from my top spot, primarily because of the flow and drive, which can start and stop here but is relentless with Ogdon. Of course, the 1968 RCA piano sound can't compare with Steinway's 2017 sound, and Russo has many beautiful and important things to say about this work.

The Corelli Variations are just as well played and recorded, but I do object to the 18 minute work as only one track.

In between the two big works, we are treated to three nicely contrasting Etudes-Tableaux: Op.33:3 in C minor and 33:6 and 39:5 in E-flat minor. The inclusion of four of Earl Wild's brilliant song transcriptions makes this release even more irresistible. I have the greatest admiration for pianists who can play these murderously difficult arrangements. I know how hard the original accompaniments are; I have performed all four of the songs with a singer: 'Dreams,' 'Floods of Spring,' 'The Little Island' and 'Here It Is Beautiful.' Wild adds extra verses, harmonic modulations, and tons of notes to the original; but everything he does is fully in keeping with Rachmaninoff's style. I believe that the composer would have approved.

HARRINGTON

RACHMANINOFF: *Symphony 1;*

BALAKIREV: *Tamara*

London Symphony/ Valery Gergiev

LSO 784 [SACD] 61 minutes

"You can't phone it in", goes the old saying. Well, Gergiev sort of does here. There's a certain soullessness to this performance that reminds me of the emptiness of the "Phone Dead" generation.

Gergiev doesn't turn in a bad performance of the symphony; it's just not entirely convincing or interesting. Of course, the work's premiere in St Petersburg in 1897 was one of the famous failures of musical history. The orchestra was under-rehearsed; the conductor, Alexander Glazounov, was unsympathetic to

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