

CLASSICAL CD REVIEWS

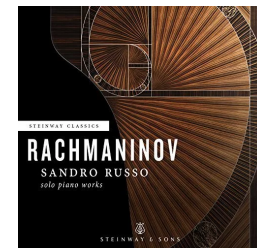


RACHMANINOV: Piano Sonata No. 1 in d minor; 3 Etudes-Tableaux; 4 Songs; Variations on a Theme of Corelli – Sandro Russo, p. – Steinway & Sons

by [Audiophile Audition](#) / April 11, 2017 / [Classical CD Reviews](#)

Sandro Russo pays homage to the continuity of style and mood in early and late works of Sergei Rachmaninov.

RACHMANINOV: Solo Piano Works = Piano Sonata No. 1 in d minor, Op. 28; 3 Etudes-Tableaux; 4 Songs (arr. E. Wild); Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op. 42 – Sandro Russo, piano – Steinway & Sons 30077, 78:04 (3/17/17) [Distr. by Naxos] **:**



A graduate of the Vincenzo Bellini Conservatory and the Royal College of Music in London, pianist Sandro Russo means “to showcase the multiple facets of [Rachmaninov’s] artistic language.” Russo (rec. 13 & 20 June 2016) addresses the imposing Piano Sonata No. 1 (1908), a piece inspired by both the Faust legend and the Liszt *Faust Symphony*, with its musical portraits of Faust, Gretchen, and Mephistopheles. In fact, the sketches for the *d minor Sonata* suggest Rachmaninov’s symphonic ambitions, though he would discard any program from the piece, as such. In three large, intricate movements, the sonata resonates with the ubiquitous *Dies Irae* of the Requiem Mass, especially given Rachmaninov’s gothic sensibility and his admiration of the Liszt *Totentanz*. Rachmaninov presented the draft of the work to colleague Konstantin Igumnov, who premiered the work.



Russo attacks the first movement Allegro moderato with pungent fervor, its Russian bells ringing and its folk idiom in lyrical *bel canto*. Russo builds an impressive, mounting arch that ripples with scales and huge block chords and repeated notes. The percussive aspects of the score may become too intrusive for some tastes. The element of longing detectable in this music might be attributed to Rachmaninov’s fascination with Byron’s *Manfred*, his having set the Tchaikovsky symphony for two pianos. The Lento casts a romantic glow rife with Schumann conceits, particularly the *Romance in*

F-sharp Major, Op. 28, No. 2. The watery, singing line in broken figures might echo Scriabin and Rachmaninov's own *c minor Concerto*.

The *Allegro molto* contains galloping figures that resonate with militant hauteur and a strong sense of the opening movement of the Chopin *Second Sonata*. This movement ends with a kind of epilogue, at first meditative in glossy arpeggios, reminiscent of Schumann's *Fantasie, Op. 17*. Then, Rachmaninov's thick *stretti* and polyphony take over, invoking those Russian bells in tandem with Beethoven's "fate" motive. The character of the music – rather emotionally wrought – helps explain why this work has not yet held thrall over audiences, but Russo's conviction of its merits – along with performances by the likes of Alexis Weissenberg – may overcome the collective coolness towards its power.

Russo's set of three *Etudes-Tableaux*: in *c minor, Op. 33, No. 3*; in *e-flat minor, Op. 33, No. 6*; and in *e-flat minor, Op. 39, No. 5* fill out his vision of the composer's lachrymose sensibility that still embraces a tender poetry. "Six feet of gloom" had been Stravinsky's assessment of the tall and lean Rachmaninov. Much pedal assists Russo's enunciation of the Rachmaninov ethos, which occasionally resonates with an organ sonority that rivals Busoni's notion of Bach. The *Op. 33, No. 6* echoes aspects of Medtner, as a kind of fairy-tale etude-scherzo. The *Op. 39, No. 5* projects that colossal (percussive) majesty we hear also in the *b minor Prelude*, with clear homage to Chopin.

Russo chooses four of American virtuoso Earl Wild's transcriptions of Rachmaninov songs: "Dreams," *Op. 38, No. 5*; "Floods of Spring," *Op. 14, No. 11*; "The Little Island," *Op. 14, No. 2*; and "Where Beauty Dwells," *Op. 21, No. 7*. These pieces exploit the piano's delicacy as much as the etudes serve its percussion. Plastic and lyrical, these renditions solidify Russo's own capacity to capture intimate, salon sentiments without affectation. The *Op. 14, No. 11* owes a debt to Turgenev in its emotional urgency. The suavely gorgeous keyboard sound comes to us courtesy of Engineer Ryan Streber. "The Little Island" links Rachmaninov with Debussy and Liszt (his *Un sospiro*), perhaps by way of Mendelssohn. More passionate arpeggios grace "Where Beauty Dwells," whose roulades and flourishes obviously charm Russo as much as we.

Russo selects Rachmaninov's only published piano solo work outside of Russia (1931) for his finale: Rachmaninov wrote the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli* in 1931 while he vacationed in Switzerland. The theme of the work, though attributed to Corelli, belongs in fact to *La Folia*, whose origins, at least in printed music, go back to at least the mid-17th century and some fifty years, and essentially presents a chord progression in *d minor* with a few passing bars in the relative major. Rachmaninov likely admired it as part of his knowledge of Franz Liszt's *Rhapsodie Espagnole*. Typical of Rachmaninov's late style – of the *Fourth Piano Concerto* – the setting of the theme, terse and laconic, casts a neo-Classic hue on the proceedings.

The twenty variations that follow resemble a full-scale sonata. The first thirteen encapsulate what might be considered a sonata's first movement, embracing a variety of moods. An ornamental and cadenza-like "Interlude," loosely based on the theme, then follows before proceeding to the next variations. Shifting to the key of *D-flat Major*, the following two variations together form a sort of central slow movement and present *La Folia* in sweetly lyrical tones. Finally, the remaining five variations form the work's finale, returning abruptly to the tonic key and building the theme through increasingly energetic treatments. With an air of solemnity and mystery the work fades from the *fortissimo* of the final variation to close softly in the key of *d minor*. Besides having mastered the sheer digital obstacles Rachmaninov created as a salute to his own, enormous hands, Russo maintains a flexible, fluent line that carries us dramatically even through the poised silences, quite a feat of intelligent virtuosity!

—Gary Lemco