

# Sergei Rachmaninov

Morceaux de Fantaisie Op.3

Etudes-Tableaux Op.33

Corelli Variations Op.42

# Nareh Arghamanyan

piano

## Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

### Morceaux de Fantaisie Op. 3 (Fantasy Pieces)

1	Elégie Op. 3 No. 1 in E-flat minor	3. 35
2	Prelude Op. 3 No. 2 in C-sharp minor	3. 49
3	Mélodie Op. 3 No. 3 in E major (version 1940)	4. 15
4	Polichinelle Op. 3 No. 4 in F-sharp minor	3. 28
5	Sérénade Op. 3 No. 5 in B-flat minor (version 1940)	3. 29

### Etudes-Tableaux Op. 33

6	No. 1 in F minor	2. 40
7	No. 2 in C major	2. 22
8	No. 3 (Op. Posth.) in C minor	4. 37
9	No. 5 (Op. Posth.) in D minor	2. 59
10	No. 6 in E-flat minor	1. 43
11	No. 7 in E-flat major	1. 43
12	No. 8 in G minor	4. 03
13	No. 9 in C-sharp minor	3. 27

### Variations on a Theme of Corelli Op. 42

14	Theme	0. 57
15	Variations I – VII	4. 06
16	Variations VIII-XII	3. 32
17	Variation XIII	0. 31
18	Intermezzo	1. 38
19	Variations XIV-XX	5. 42
20	Coda	1. 26

### Nareh Arghamanyan piano

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*Piano-tuner: Ehud Loudar*

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## My Rachmaninoff: A lifetime in music

*"I try to make my music speak simply and directly that which is in my heart at the time I am composing. If there is love there, or bitterness, or sadness, or religion, these moods become part of my music, and it becomes either beautiful or bitter or sad or religious. For music is as much a part of my living as breathing and eating. I compose music because I must give expression to my feeling, just as I talk because I must give utterance to my thoughts."*

*Sergei Rachmaninoff*

What does Sergei Rachmaninoff mean to me? Is he another cryptographer of this eternal mystery called "music"? Or is he a creator? Perhaps a wandering musician? Or perhaps even more than simply a great composer and pianist? What is he disclosing to me by means of his sometimes sombre, sometimes tender, sometimes encouraging and ennobling music? Am I able to hear him, am I able to at least transfer his feelings and emotions to the audience? Why do I play his compositions? Will anything change in this mad, mad world if I do not perform them?... Fantasy, imagination, absorbing beauty, illusions, blinding visions, powerful outbursts, bright colours, divine serenity, striving for light and eternity... Rachmaninoff's music is full of all these elements and that is also why it attracts and moves me. But is that all?...

I want, and try, to discern the person Rachmaninoff behind his music (or perhaps in front of it?), to understand where he came from, what made him the person he was, what so enriched his creative spirit (his soul) and his inner world. What were his feelings while creating, for example, his Etudes tableaux, which images did he wish to draw with his powerful fantasy – and are we capable of seeing the same visions? – what was he trying to convey with the title of an Etude? Later, I came across a quote from Rachmaninoff himself, as follows: "I do not believe in the artist disclosing too many images. Let him portray for himself that which seems most appropriate to him." And so I tried to let my fantasy fly free: bells ringing at sunset, a cyclone, a horsewoman who gets lost in an obscure Russian forest, is not rescued, and finally merges with the darkness, a mystical, ritual burial, madness...

Tall, scrawny, with large, deep-blue eyes and long, bony fingers, champing at the bit, constantly restless and looking for a way out of his cage, jumpy, never self-confident, often deeply dejected... A homesick outcast, living abroad for a quarter of a century... Rising and falling, then rising again, yet falling again... Music and poetry; the sad and nostalgic poetry that accompanied his life... Rachmaninoff was an Orthodox

Christian and knew how to use the language of symbols; thus, he managed to create works capable of abrading and purifying a person, bestowing upon him greater sensitivity and emotional insight.

As the moon reflects the sun, thus Rachmaninoff reflects in his music the warmth of the eternal fire, the existence of which we can imagine only dimly, while attempting to disperse the mist... with our hands. He was blessed with an extraordinary musical talent, he dominated the art of conducting and created musical masterpieces – and at the same time was an excellent pianist – yet he was not acknowledged by the majority of contemporary critics and music-lovers. For his brilliant technique, exceptional ear, poetic musicality and completeness of performance created an incorrect impression: namely, that he was more a brilliant pianist than a composer. Critics often condemned Rachmaninoff the composer as lacking in depth; they considered his works to be mawkish and sentimental, based not on the rules and regulations of composing, but rather on emotion and sensory perceptions. On the other hand, the bold use of these structural, stylistic, and architectural elements demonstrate that we are dealing here with a professional master, who has an ample understanding of the secrets and skills involved with composition. Another highly convincing manifestation of this fact is the priority he gave to counterpoint in most of his compositions. Rachmaninoff was greatly inspired by Bach and considered him to be the "forefather" of all composers. He enriched the art of polyphony with bright new colours.

In this album, I have included works from every period of Rachmaninoff's creative life. My intention was to present the entire spectrum of his personality, demonstrating the close interconnection between these pieces, and underlining the characteristics inherent to each piece.

### Morceaux de Fantaisie, Op. 3 (1892)

Rachmaninoff's *Morceaux de Fantaisie*, Op. 3 is considered

one of the best works from his early period. It is his first piano album, written when he was 19 years old, having just graduated from the Moscow Conservatory. The album is dedicated to his teacher, the composer A. Arensky. All five pieces stand out, each with its own character and structure. They capture the listener with their directness and depth of feeling.

*The Élégie*, No. 1, was written in memory of Arensky, whose sudden death left a hole in the heart of the young Rachmaninoff. The work is full of sorrow, regret and mourning. The middle part contains lively memories and faint sparks of light, but at the end the pain of his loss and the desperate cry of his soul return. When playing this piece, I always think of my first beloved piano teacher Alexander Gurgenov, who died far too young, and I wish to dedicate this performance to his bright memory.

*The Prélude*, No. 2, is one of Rachmaninoff's most famous works. The composer dreamt that he was attending a crowded funeral. As he approaches the coffin, he becomes terrified as he recognizes himself lying there. The theme, based on just three notes, is gradually built up with major contrasts in the harmonic and thematic material, highlighting the struggle between life and death, and finally achieves a triumphant symphonic sound. At the end of the piece, we hear symbolic church bells announcing the start of a new life at first light. *The Prélude* became so popular that the audiences insisted on his performing it as an encore, which eventually led him to tire of it, thereafter reluctant to play the piece.

*The Mélodie*, No. 3, is a dialogue between two lovers. It is a wonderful example of a multilayered piece, in which first the boy, then the girl confess their love for one another; in the end, their hearts are united in a harmonious duet. Rachmaninoff rewrote the *Mélodie* (as well as the *Sérénade*) in 1940, adding unique voices and various textures to both pieces. As I prefer the 1940 versions, these are the ones included in my CD.

In the *Polichinelle*, No. 4, Rachmaninoff portrays a lame and stubborn little goblin, who feels like the king of the castle when nobody is at home. But whenever he hears a knock at the door, he trembles in fear and rushes to the closest corner to hide. In this piece, one can hear the influence of *Scarbo* from Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit*.

*The Sérénade*, No. 5, is based on Spanish rhythms, combined with guitar sounds and the surprising harmonic motifs of an oriental melody.

#### **Etude-Tableaux, Op. 33 (1911)**

Like his fellow-composers Chopin, Liszt, Debussy and Scriabin, Rachmaninoff also wrote Etudes, known as his *Etude-Tableaux* (Op. 33 and Op. 39). This CD contains all eight of his Op. 33 *Etudes-Tableaux*. Often the listener wonders why the fourth Etude in A minor is missing. Well, it was removed at a later date by Rachmaninoff himself and re-inserted in his Op. 39 as the Etude No. 6. Not only do the *Etudes-Tableaux* demand

great technical skills from the performer, they also require a vivid and powerful imagination.

To quote Peter Donohoe\*, the Etude No. 1 "consists almost throughout of a duet between a lyrical melody in the treble and a disjointed march in the bass. One is struck by the similarity of the melody to that of the opening of the 3rd Piano Concerto". In the Etude No. 2, "one is reminded of the Prélude Op. 32, No. 12. Here it is the character and shape of the accompaniment which is reminiscent." In the Etude No. 3, "the strange, sombre but beautiful harmonies of the first section in C minor give way to the tranquillity of the second section in the major, in which the only genuine departure from the tonic is during the wonderful passage of nine bars following the *poco a poco agitato*, subsequently quoted at the end of the second movement of the 4th Piano Concerto." As far as the Etude No. 5 is concerned, "it is interesting to note the relationship to both the Prélude Op. 23, No. 3 and the 1st Piano Sonata, with both of which it shares the same key," whilst the Etude No. 6 "is akin to the Prelude in B flat minor of Chopin. This complex work is amongst the most difficult of the Etudes-Tableaux" and is unofficially called *The blizzard*. The Etude No. 7 "is a kind of call to arms, in the manner of Préludes Op. 23, No. 2 and Op. 32, No. 3. Fanfare-like march rhythms consolidate the different tonalities of each section in a characteristic style". The melody of Etude No. 8 "is elaborated upon in parallel-moving harmonies, giving the work a slightly impressionistic flavour, and one cannot fail to notice the (possibly subconscious) reference in the final bars to the 1st Ballade of Chopin". The Etude No. 9 "is possibly strangest of all these pieces. The main protagonists in this uncharacteristically violent and unmelodic piece are an obsessive dotted rhythm and a battle between major and minor, of which the winner is the minor".

#### **Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op. 42 (1931)**

Towards the end of his life, Rachmaninoff created very little, mainly due to his dissatisfaction with both himself and his work, which resulted in a depression (typical of many celebrities). The *Paganini* Variations and the *Corelli* Variations were among his last piano works: it would be fair to call them masterpieces of a kind, in which the composer tells us of the difficult path he followed. Not many composers have managed to master the variation form: the actual composition work involved is difficult, mainly because the task of the composer is to enrich each variation with new rhythms and ideas, find new solutions, but nevertheless to maintain the structure of the main theme. However, Rachmaninoff is certainly one of the few to have succeeded.

*The Variations on a Theme of Corelli* is based on the popular dance-duet *La Follia*, the theme of which was taken up by many composers, although only Rachmaninoff managed to transform it in such

a colourful and diverse manner. And indeed, Rachmaninoff set himself an even more complicated task, which he managed to complete successfully: he tried to emulate or incorporate the style of other composers in some of the variations – echoes of Bach, Chopin, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Satie, Liszt, and Medtner are heard throughout – yet he concluded the work with his own unique texture and unmistakable voice. A typical "Rachmaninoff coda", full of fading and hopeless-sounding tones – with Rachmaninoff leaving the stage, regretting the lack of comprehension he received as well as his own lack of self-comprehension...

I think the American writer Kurt Vonnegut may well have been inspired by Rachmaninoff's artistry when he ordered the following to be inscribed on his gravestone: "The only proof he needed for the existence of God was music."

If my performance in this album can elicit the same thought from even a single soul, I will know that my work has not been in vain.

*Nareh Arghamanyan*, © 2012

### **An expressive artist of the highest level**

Conducting? Playing the piano? Composing? Which of these particularly distinctive talents should he go for? As Engel put it, Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) was a kind of "holy trinity", constantly torn between his desire to perform the music himself and his vocation as a creative composer. Whereas his skills as pianist and conductor were undisputed, as a composer Rachmaninoff came under fire from the critics, especially after his emigration to the United States. The main complaint being that Rachmaninoff primarily laid the emphasis on feelings in his works, thereby providing the listener with a feeble sense of euphoria by enabling him to absorb the music in a purely entertainment-orientated manner. In short, his compositions were a musical recreation of Hollywood, a cinemascope for the ears. Objection! Rachmaninoff's works dating from his middle and late creative periods present a combination of sense and sensuality that was – and still is – often trimmed away in contemporary music. Just disregard the "best-sellers" in his oeuvre (such as his Prelude in C sharp minor recorded on this CD, scorned by Theodor W. Adorno (German music-theorist, composer, social philosopher) as "a giant bagatelle" for "infantile adults") and instead take a more accurate look at works like his *Corelli* Variations, with its inner musical structures. That way, you will discover an entire world of conflict below the polished 'sound-surface' of the work.

For the last decade, the music world in Germany has no longer

categorized Rachmaninoff as belonging exclusively to the ranks of the virtuoso heavyweights, thereby disregarding his other works. And German musicologists have also opened their doors – at times, tightly locked – to the triple-talented Russian, admitting him to the realms of classical music. In 1994, Maria Biesold stated soberly: “Although he has always been included in the concert repertoire, it would be hard to find a composer [like Rachmaninoff, F.S.], who has received such a disproportionate lack of musicological attention – especially in Germany.” Today, fortunately, the situation has changed.

In 1941, shortly before his death and after completing his last work, Rachmaninoff had again expressed his musical credo in a most unequivocal manner: “I feel no sympathy towards composers who write their works according to preconceived formulas or preconceived ideas. Or towards composers who write in a certain style, because it is in fashion. Great music has never been produced in this manner. [...] A composer’s music should be an expression of his native country, of his love affairs, his religion, the books that have influenced him, the pictures he loves. It should be the product of the whole of the composer’s experiences.” In this context, it is interesting to note that the damning criticism with which his first symphony was received at its première in 1897 did not target any conservative tendencies or mawkish sentimentality, but focussed rather on its “modernist” characteristics. Especially in his early works, Rachmaninoff was very well aware of the compositional trends of the day – however, he never actually pandered to the fashion of the day.

So let us simply ignore the inconsistency of complete rejection by the critics and scholars on the one hand, and an approving and definitely enthusiastic reception from the audience on the other – and take pleasure in this high-quality expressive music. For in Rachmaninoff’s works, emotion and intensity of expression are the primary factors, and definitely play a more important role than any formal, structural thinking. It is from this that the basic principles of Rachmaninoff’s oeuvre are derived: widely spun melodies, complex harmonies, richly hued instruments, powerful rhythms, and an “ecstatic expressivity that leads to an orgasmic exuberance.” Rachmaninoff pours these elements into a form based on classical traditions and adds to these ingredients a highly individual component from the composer’s tool-kit: a fascinatingly virtuoso approach to the piano. It is precisely this blend that constitutes Rachmaninoff’s original and wholly individual style. Christoph Flamm’s words hit the nail on the head in a more scientific description: “To him, music was an essential expression of art, of personal confession, and therefore closely linked to a predominantly lyrical or dramatic ‘tone of voice’. Not until much later, did he give any indication of objectification, of ironic refraction, or of distancing himself from the material.”

### **Morceaux de Fantaisie, Op. 3 (1892)**

Rachmaninoff invested the above-mentioned Prelude in C sharp minor – the second piece of the five *Fantasy Pieces* collated in his Opus 3, which he composed in 1892 just after completing his studies – with the unfortunate title of “Mr. C sharp minor”. Together with his Piano Concerto No. 2, this is the most frequently discussed and most controversially interpreted work by Rachmaninoff. Constructed in three parts, the piece is dominated by a three-note motto theme that determines the outer parts. Following an excitable triplet section, the main motif once again breaks through in full force, overlaid with all the varied intensification techniques on the piano, before the work sinks back exhausted, as it were, into the primal depths of the beginning.

Compared to this piece, which has become a rather unfortunate trademark, the four other *Fantasy Pieces* – which Rachmaninoff had dedicated to his teacher Arensky – seem rather unfairly to pale into insignificance. They are fine character studies, the mood of which can be easily deduced from the titles, with clear references to various character pieces by Chopin and Schumann. The *Elegy* is highly expressive, the melody presenting the theme in the middle voices with a delightfully “saturated” accompaniment; in the *Polichinelle*, the buffoon literally plays us up; whereas the guitar-like overtones of the *Serenade* in 3/8 time create a Spanish mood, which somehow seems unreal.

### **Etudes-Tableaux, Op. 33 (1911)**

Even the generic name is peculiar: Etudes-Tableaux – in other words, ‘Picture Studies’ is the term used to describe the 17 pieces collated by Sergei Rachmaninoff in two cycles. Here, the term “cycle” should be used with caution, as the composer did not create any programmatic relationship between the individual pieces. Originally, Rachmaninoff’s Opus 33 (dating from 1911) consisted of nine pieces; however, he withdrew the numbers 3 - 5. Like their sister-works in Opus 39, the two components of the works can be deduced from and explained by the generic name: the enormous technical difficulties and the effective virtuoso components bear witness to the term ‘Etudes’, whereas the inherent poetry of the music refers to the ‘Tableaux’ part. Thus, Opus 39, No. 5 refers to *The Morning*, a painting by Arnold Böcklin. The Etudes-Tableaux immediately encourage the listener to look beyond their virtuoso surface: and there in the depths, the music speaks, it illustrates, it inspires and psychologizes.

“A part from [...] one exception (Op. 33, No. 7 [...]), there is no more striking confidence here; even the topos of the self-contained lyrical idyll is almost entirely lacking (Op. 33, No. 2) – either it is shattered (Op. 33, No. 8), or it remains as an otherworldly dream sequence (Op. 33,

No. 3). And in these etudes, Rachmaninoff has – perhaps even more compellingly than ever before – put the moment of defeat to music, as it also leads here also to an abandonment of the parameters that guarantee stability: this is represented paradigmatically by the [...] shattered march rhythm in Op. 33, No. 1.” (Flamm.) If we reflect on Rachmaninoff’s above-quoted musical credo dating from 1941, we are not surprised – after all, “[Music] should be the product of the whole of the composer’s experiences.”

### **Variations on a Theme of Corelli, Op. 42 (1931)**

The great piano cycles on themes by Corelli and Paganini are included in Rachmaninoff’s last works. Here, the composer discovered a new expressive environment, in which he approaches a type of classicism. They contain very little pathos, the composition “dribbles around” the link to tradition. Despite the title, *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, the theme of this cycle was not actually written by Arcangelo Corelli (1653 – 1713): rather, it is an ancient melody, *La follia*, derived from the Spanish-French folk-dances, of which the Italian composer had availed himself.

A ‘variation’ work provides great composers with the opportunity to apply their skills to the art of variation, and thus to prove their creative qualities in dealing with a given subject. Strictly speaking, of course, variation works have entailed – and especially so since Beethoven and Brahms – rigorously detailed compositional work in all musical categories, with all sorts of musical parameters. Here, Rachmaninoff proves himself to be a master in the exploration of expression. Although the work does not contain an actual programme, the listener is aware of the deeply psychological, sensory rejections and developments. Numerous interpretations have emphasized the “mood of farewell” (Rueger), which can be felt throughout the entire cycle. Rachmaninoff had probably sensed at last, that he would never again see his native Russia. The structure is laid out in three parts: the theme is followed by the variations 1-13 in the first section; subsequently, there is a rather slow intermediate section containing the variations 14-15; and finally, the work concludes with the variations 16-20 and the coda.

## **Nareh Arghamanyan** piano

*"Elegance, humour, deliciously burbling trills and fiery imagination - this introduced me to a major, major, major talent. Pianists don't come any better, another potential superstar has arrived!"*

*American Record Guide*

**B**orn in 1989 in Armenia, Nareh Arghamanyan began her piano studies at the age of five. Three years later, she entered the Tchaikovsky Music School for Talented Children in Yerevan, where she studied with Alexander Gurgenov. In 2004 she was the youngest student to be admitted to the University for Music and Performing Arts Vienna, where she studied with Heinz Medjimorec. Since October 2010 she continues her studies with Arie Vardi in Hannover.

She won an impressive number of awards with as highlight the first prize at the 2008 Montreal International Music Competition. Nareh Arghamanyan was invited by orchestras like the Wiener Symphoniker, the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra the Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg and the radio-orchestras of Hamburg and Frankfurt and plays recitals at prestigious venues such as Tonhalle Zurich, The Berliner Philharmonie and in Vienna at the Konzerthaus and the Musikverein.

In the US she already performed in New York, San Francisco, Boston and Philadelphia.

At the invitation of Mitsuko Uchida, Nareh Arghamanyan returned to the prestigious Marlboro Festival in summer 2011. She was also invited at Schleswig-Holstein Musik Festival and has played at many festivals internationally including the Tanglewood Festival, Festival de Lanaudière, Festspiele Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and the Colmar Festival.

In her early twenties Nareh Arghamanyan belongs to the promising generation of today's finest pianists. Nareh Arghamanyan signed an exclusive recording contract with the Dutch label PentaTone.



