

EMI
CLASSICS

RACHMANINOV
SONGS

DIMITRI
KHARITONOV

LEIF OVE
ANDSNES

Rachmaninov Songs

Sergei Rachmaninov adored singing and singers. In childhood he was introduced to the soul-stirring vocalism of Russian Orthodox choirs, a lifelong musical influence. As a student he heard the greatest of Italian opera stars, whose *bel canto* artistry was not lost on him. He eventually included amongst his friends and colleagues Chaliapin, Nezhdanova, Sobinov and Koshetz. It hardly seems surprising that his songs constantly respect the voice, while giving full rein to singers' interpretative possibilities.

The songs cover little new ground, representing instead the final flowering of the *romance* previously enriched by Glinka and Tchaikovsky. From the beginning Rachmaninov understood a song's emotional content, although his subtlety and sense of proportion developed significantly over 26 years. He generally set poetry of the Russian Romantics, confronting texts of his own time only in his last two song groups.

The anguish of loss, painfully familiar to Rachmaninov (two sisters died young), eloquently colours many songs. He also persuasively depicts any natural scene, whether peaceful or stormy. His finest songs explore aspects of love

relationships, sorrowful reminiscence above all. There he invariably reaches the heart of the matter, thanks to the honesty with which he deploys his prodigious musical resources.

Twelve of Rachmaninov's 83 songs appeared posthumously, including the earliest "By the gates" (1890); Lermontov's poem inspires an expressiveness astounding in a 17-year-old. His second song, "I shall tell you nothing" (1890), while still more fervent, wants greater variety and imagination. The natural scene in "April! A festive spring day" (1891) is a peaceful one, yet the singer is an eager young lover and the setting possesses a cumulative sweep, yielding to a sweet questioning in the vocal line's final phrases.

Opus 4 dates from 1891-1893, excepting the celebrated "In the Mysterious Silence of the Night" (1890). Crowned by a superbly gauged climax and a ravishing sustained *ppp* conclusion, voice and accompaniment function throughout almost independently (to a fault, perhaps, e.g. the second section, where the piano can bury the singer's middle voice). The almost equally popular "Oh, do not sing to me", fourth of the six songs, is framed by spellbinding melismas, instantly evoking an unmistakably Georgian aura, while communicating intense nostalgia.

The twelve songs of Opus 14 (1896) include "The Isle", in which Rachmaninov brings a tone of sweet serenity to Shelley's "little lawny islet". Youthful impetuosity ignites "I came to her", punctuated by unexpected leaps in the line. The Tchaikovskian "Oh, do not grieve" fully deserves the exquisite text of Apukhtin, a contemporary of Pushkin. Rachmaninov brought all his personal experience of despair to "It is time", in which the piano's insistent, driving triplets leave no doubt that hopelessness awaits humankind.

During the three years following the disastrous premiere of his first symphony in 1897, the composer wrote precious few new pieces, among them the posthumously published "Did you hiccup, Natasha?" (1899). Rachmaninov did not consider ebullience his strong suit musically, but the view belies this song's rollicking character achieved through rhythmic verve and line-by-line textual specificity. Writing the song for his future wife, Rachmaninov tucked the "I love you" motive of Tchaikovsky's *Lensky* into the accompaniment.

The twelve songs of Opus 21 (1902) include "Fate", written two years earlier. This lengthy piece, composed for Chaliapin, was inspired by the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The atypically exaggerated effects have prompted

much vehement criticism; only an artist of Chaliapin-like incisiveness can make the song convincing. In "Beside a New Grave" the piano part vividly clarifies the singer's emotional wounds. One finds that song's opposite number in the eternally fresh, gently rapturous "Lilacs". The two sections of "I am no prophet" could hardly achieve greater contrast: the first extremely imposing with the line supported entirely chordally, the second marked *tranquillo* and enhanced by a suitably lyre-like postlude.

Among the fifteen Opus 26 songs (1906) is "Christ is risen", which – through comparatively simple musical means – harrowingly laments the world's sorry state. "To the children" presents a very limited vocal compass, but the outburst of "Oh, children!" stuns the listener nonetheless. Rachmaninov wrote of "The night is mournful" that it is not the voice that must sing, but the piano; here he again achieves an exquisite musical economy. "We met yesterday" makes its points through short, disconnected phrases, the voice quite nakedly exposed. "All things pass away" seems unnervingly prophetic: set partly in near-recitative, it anticipates Rachmaninov's sentiments of a few years later, when he would watch helplessly as his old way of life disintegrated.

The textual choices for the 14 songs comprising Opus 34 (1912) were heavily influenced by suggestions from Rachmaninov's devoted correspondent, the poet Marina Shaginyan.

"Arion" boasts a typically flamboyant piano part, scampering and heavily arpeggiated throughout. The storm of Pushkin's poem justifies this hair-raisingly dramatic treatment. Rock-solid legato singing can illuminate the voice's final phrases, in which the narrator is obviously sobered by having survived the catastrophe.

In the six songs of Opus 38 (1916), Rachmaninov finally concentrates on poems of contemporary writers (symbolists recommended by Shaginyan). The virtuosic "A-oo", the composer's final song, exhibits true harmonic boldness but lacks the unforced passion of earlier songs. Surely more momentous matters pre-occupied him. In 1917 he fled his beloved homeland, never to return, his desire to write songs forever extinguished.

© ROGER PINES, 1999

Dimitri Kharitonov studied at the Rimsky-Korsakov College of Music in Leningrad and at the Odessa State Academy. His prizes include the Verviers International Opera Competition – Grand Prix (1987), Bastianini International

Competition – Gold Medal (1988), and the Voci Verdiane Competition (1988). He was principal baritone at the Bolshoi Opera in Moscow for four years, where he sang the title role of *Eugene Onegin* many times. His other main performances at this theatre included *The Queen of Spades*, *Iolanta* (Tchaikovsky) and *The Duenna* (Prokofiev). In the West, he has performed at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, Teatro Liceu Barcelona, Chicago Lyric Opera, San Francisco Opera, Los Angeles Music Center Opera and at the Glyndebourne, Edinburgh and 'Maggio Musicale Fiorentino' festivals.

He made his debut at La Scala Milan in a new production of Prokofiev's *The Gambler* under Valery Gergiev, followed by *Iolanta* both at the Champs-Élysées Theatre in Paris and in Dresden, under Yuri Temirkanov. Other recent productions include *Nabucco* in Brno, *Rigoletto* in Düsseldorf and *Khovanshchina* (Mussorgsky) at La Scala, again under Gergiev. His operatic repertoire also includes Jochanaan (*Salome*), Prince Sndrei (*War and Peace*), Enrico (*Lucia di Lammermoor*) and Escamillo (*Carmen*). His concert repertoire includes Shostakovich's *Seven Poems of Michelangelo*, Orff's *Carmina Burana*, Stravinsky's *Les Noces* and many Russian art songs.