

NICOLAS NAMORADZE
Raven's Cry Theatre – Sechelt
February 19, 2023

Nicolas Namoradze's recital is built around two major anniversary years: the 150th of Sergei Rachmaninoff and the 100th of György Ligeti. In the first half of the program, three etudes by Ligeti are interspersed with excerpts from Bach's *Art of Fugue*, all framed by music of Rachmaninoff, as refracted through Namoradze's additional talents as composer or arranger. After intermission we hear Schubert's final (and, to many, greatest) sonata, a work that had special meaning to Ligeti. There exists a rare film of him playing the sonata at his home in Hamburg.

NAMORADZE: MEMORIES OF RACHMANINOFF'S GEORGIAN SONG

NICOLAS NAMORADZE

Born in Tbilisi, Georgia, August 19, 1992; now living in Berlin

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Born at Semyonovo (an estate in Oneg), District of Novgorod, April 1, 1873; died in Beverly Hills, California, March 28, 1943

Memories of Rachmaninoff's Georgian Song is Nicolas Namoradze's reinterpretation of one of Rachmaninoff's finest songs, "Do not sing for me, fair maiden." It is one of four songs published in 1893 as Op. 4, the composer's first published songs in a list that would eventually number over eighty. Rachmaninoff was barely twenty, but the assurance, melodic invention, and mastery of the medium are already apparent. The song is dedicated to the composer's future wife, Natalya Satina. The text comes from Pushkin, and has been set by numerous other composers as well, including Balakirev, Glinka, Liadov, and Rimsky-Korsakov. The first lines of Rachmaninoff's "Georgian song" are "Oh, never sing to me again / The songs of Georgia, fair maiden," as the poet pleads with his lover not to evoke painful memories of the past in her songs about Georgia.

RACHMANINOFF: ADAGIO from SYMPHONY NO. 2
(arranged for solo piano by Nicolas Namoradze)

Few symphonies written in the twentieth century achieved the fame and popularity of Rachmaninoff's Second. The score was published in 1908, but then the manuscript went missing for nearly a century. It turned up in a cellar in Switzerland in 2004. Until then, it was the only Rachmaninoff manuscript not accounted for, making it all the more tantalizing as a prize find. It was slated to go to auction at Sotheby's shortly thereafter, but due to complex litigation it was a decade before the auction took place. In May 2014 the score sold for £1,202,500.

Last year, Nicolas Namoradze arranged the symphony's third movement (*Adagio*) for solo piano. He is far from the first to have done so, but Namoradze's approach is his own. He explains: "The *Adagio* is emblematic of many features that define [Rachmaninoff's] compositional language, including enchantingly expansive melodies, a rich harmonic palette, searing climaxes, and lush, full textures. While adhering strictly to the thematic and harmonic material of the original, this arrangement is less a strict transcription and more a reimagining of the movement for the piano, taking a generally liberal approach with reworking the textures in order to create a pianistically idiomatic piece. The piano writing is informed both by Rachmaninoff's compositional style as well as my own approach to keyboard texture."

The *Adagio* movement is one of the lyric highlights of all Rachmaninoff. No fewer than three gorgeous melodies are heard, beginning with one of the most popular ever written. Following immediately on this theme comes a second, one of great repose and tranquility. Twenty-three continuous measures of exquisite beauty wind on and on, providing another example of Rachmaninoff's ability to expand a short idea into one of heavenly length. (This theme goes to the clarinet in the orchestral score.) American pianist Arthur Loesser wrote in 1939 that this music "gives off a vapor of drugged sweetness, of fatalistic melancholy."

LIGETI: ÉTUDES POUR PIANO

No. 11: En suspens – Andante con moto

No. 13: L'Escalier du diable (The Devil's Staircase) – Presto legato, ma leggiero

No. 16: Pour Irina – Andante con espressione, rubato, molto legato

– Allegro con moto, sempre legato – Allegro vivace – Molto vivace

GYÖRGY LIGETI: Born in Dicsöszentmárton, Transylvania (formerly in Hungary, now Târnăveni, Romania), May 28, 1923; died in Vienna, June 12, 2006

György Ligeti followed in the line of distinguished twentieth-century Hungarian composers that runs from Bartók and Kodály through Sándor Veress and Miklós Rózsa. When he died seventeen years ago at the age of 83, Ligeti was internationally recognized as one of the leading composers of his generation. Right up until his death he remained active, teaching at the Hochschule für Musik in Hamburg and composing.

The eighteen piano etudes, divided into three books, occupied Ligeti from the mid 1980s to the first years of the present century. The first six were published in Germany in 1985 and quickly assumed a secure place in the repertory of late twentieth-century piano music. Another measure of the success of the first book of etudes is their having won the \$150,000 1986 Grawemeyer Award from the University of Louisville (Kentucky), one of the most prestigious and lucrative prizes in classical music.

In these pieces – more exercises in composition than in keyboard dexterity – Ligeti explores the compositional processes of highly complex polyrhythms. A rhythmic figure is introduced at the outset, then developed in a continuous variation process. One of the composer's stated aims is "to produce the illusion of simultaneous different speeds, produced by only one artist."

Etude No. 11, "En Suspens," is appropriately entitled, as the listener is kept "in suspense" as to when – or if – the pianist's two hands will ever coincide. Each independently meanders gently and softly through its own world.

Listeners with a Classical education may recall the Greek myth of Sisyphus repeatedly attempting to roll a large rock up a hill, only to lose grip on it as he nears the top and see it roll back down. A similar state of affairs seems to inform Ligeti's thirteenth etude, entitled "The Devil's Staircase." Extremes of dynamics as well as extremes of the piano's range are exploited. The music is unmeasured (no bar lines), but it is strongly rhythmic, with asymmetrical patterns of two and three notes sustaining the non-stop effort to reach the top of the devil's staircase. Midway through the tolling of giant bells disrupts the music's inexorable motion, bells that thereafter continue seemingly to interfere with the attempt to reach the top.

Etude No. 16, dedicated to the Russian pianist Irina Kataeva, is an enigmatic four-minute excursion through four time zones, each successively shorter in duration. Approximately three-quarters of it consists of slow, two-part writing that nearly outstays its welcome. Suddenly the note values double, then increase again for a brief passage of triplets. Finally, the last ten seconds go by in a blur of notes so fast as to be nearly indistinguishable, and the etude evaporates in the uppermost range of the keyboard.

BACH: THE ART OF FUGUE, BWV 1080

Contrapunctus 6

Contrapunctus 7

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH: Born in Eisenach, March 21, 1685; died in Leipzig, July 28, 1750

To complement (and perhaps also as a compliment to) the contrapuntal dexterity of Ligeti's Etudes, Namoradze offers two *contrapuncti* (counterpoints) from Bach's *Art of Fugue* as a sort of dramatic narrative linking two of music history's greatest purveyors of polyphonic writing.

More than two and a half centuries after its composition, Bach's *Art of Fugue* (*Die Kunst der Fuge*) remains one of the towering pinnacles in the landscape of western music. One can only stand back in astonishment at the intellectual rigor that produced such a formidable piece of musical architecture, yet at the same time admire it for the esthetic pleasure it provides on a purely intuitive level. Bach himself said that his purpose in writing was to "refresh the spirit" of music lovers.

In the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, the composer explored the world of the fugue in 48 *different* examples, twice each in the twelve major and twelve minor keys. In *The Art of Fugue*, he explored this world even further by systematically working out the *same* twelve-note fugal subject in myriad ways, all in the same key (D minor). The fourteen numbers for four voices (*contrapuncti*), the four canons for two voices, and the final, incomplete *contrapunctus* constitute a veritable textbook of fugal writing, a summation of every manner of manipulation one might conceive in attempting to write fugues.

Contrapuncti 6 and 7 are "counterfugues," in which the subject is paired with its own inversion. In No. 6 the subject appears in diminution (played twice as fast) as well, while No. 7 incorporates both diminution and augmentation.

SCHUBERT: PIANO SONATA IN B-FLAT MAJOR, D. 960

- I. Molto moderato
- II. Andante sostenuto
- III. Scherzo: Allegro vivace con delicatezza
- IV. Allegro ma non troppo

FRANZ PETER SCHUBERT: Born in Vienna, January 31, 1797; died in Vienna, November 19, 1828

The year of Schubert's death, 1828, saw the birth of an extraordinary number of his masterpieces: the *Great C-major* Symphony, the Mass in E-flat major, the String Quintet in C, thirteen of his finest songs, and the final trilogy of piano sonatas. The Sonata in B-flat major is the last of this trilogy, and one of the greatest works in a genre that occupied Schubert all his life except for the three-year period of 1820-1822. This final sonata was completed on September 26, 1828. Olympian in scope, expansive yet coherently organized in its concern for proportion and balance, saturated with gorgeous lyricism and often discussed in terms of hushed reverence by its admirers, the Sonata in B-flat stands as a landmark in the history of musical achievements. It might well be regarded as the "sonata of heavenly length," just as Schumann had dubbed Schubert's final symphony (the *Great C-major*), also composed in 1828, the "symphony of heavenly length."

The first movement opens with one of Schubert's most heavenly themes – a tender, reflective progression of smoothly-connected chords suggesting vast spaces and extended time spans. The sublime beauty of this theme is underscored by its utter simplicity. It closes on a low, mysterious trill, as if from a distant region. Three more times we hear the theme, each one slightly altered, but no less ingratiating, before we arrive at the second theme, strangely enough in the key of F-sharp minor. By the time we arrive at the expected second key area of F major (the dominant of B-flat), the second theme has pretty well run its course. The development covers a large range of events, soaring to lyric heights and passing through many harmonic conflicts before returning us to the comfort of the opening theme in its original form.

The second movement is no less sublime than the first, but is cast in a simple A-B-A mold. The key is C-sharp minor (and A major in the central episode), unusual in itself, but enharmonically close related to B-flat. The deeply contemplative and intimate nature of the movement is announced at once in the expansive, slowly-evolving theme - twelve measures long. The accompaniment takes the form of a four-note ostinato pattern covering as many octaves, and that occurs in nearly every measure of the first section. It returns in varied form in the final part of the movement. The resulting hypnotic effect – some would say sublime ecstasy – can be counted among the most memorable aspects of the whole sonata.

After two long and profound movements, some lighthearted relief is needed. This Schubert provides in the form of an elfin Scherzo, in which the single theme darts about, touching briefly on various keys. The brief embedded Trio relies on syncopation and a darker mood for its effect.

The finale's main theme is announced by a one-note "call to attention," which is associated with the theme upon nearly every subsequent appearance in the movement. On and on flows the music, propelled by endlessly repeated rhythmic patterns and a natural power of melodious invention.