



## INTERVIEW

# YEVGENY SUDBIN

### ON PERFORMING RACHMANINOV, VIA HOROWITZ

**'A**rguably among the finest, certainly most enjoyable of all Scarlatti recitals,' wrote *The Gramophone* of Yevgeny Sudbin's recent stunning debut disc.

The 24-year-old Russian pianist was both delighted and apprehensive with this, and similar, reviews. 'I immediately panicked and thought, "Gosh, it's all happening too quickly". But, of course, one well-reviewed disc does not instantly make you a household name. And I'm hardly yet in the position of being offered 150 concerts a year and having to pick and choose between them!'

A slight, elfin figure with an engagingly open manner, Sudbin has chosen to follow Scarlatti with an all-Rachmaninov disc – typical of the eclectic repertoire he developed as a boy at the St Petersburg Conservatoire. 'In every sense these composers are worlds apart: Scarlatti's sonatas have a certain purity, a strong sense of optimism, and teem with life, while Rachmaninov's music always embodies a brooding quality, with an underlying death theme – traces of the *Dies irae* are found throughout his music. And while Scarlatti was clearly ahead of his time with his sonatas, Rachmaninov was rather behind his, still composing from the very root of his "soul" – an approach that was quickly becoming taboo in the early 20th century! I specially enjoyed the challenge of recording such contrasted composers for my first two CDs.'

It was Horowitz's recordings that inspired Sudbin to explore the 'fantastic colouristic possibilities' in Scarlatti's sonatas played on a Steinway, and Horowitz again looms large in the most famous item in his Rachmaninov programme, the B flat minor Piano Sonata.

'When I moved to London in 1997 I learnt the Sonata – originally written in 1913 – in the revised version the composer made in 1931. I didn't know the original then – if I had I would have played it! In his later, American, years


Rachmaninov was obsessed with cutting things out and lightening textures. In the Sonata, though, he removed a lot of beautiful music, along with many unnecessarily complex passages – the revision is in effect a virtually new piece and not really satisfactory as a structure, especially in the drastically compressed finale. But it does have a lot more variety and transparency of texture than the original.'

Horowitz came, pre-emptively, to the rescue, creating his own version of the piece, combining the best bits from 1913 and 1931, and continuing to make small adjustments from concert to concert – a project which met with the composer's approval. Sudbin has used a text based on Horowitz's last recording of the work for this new disc.

The release pairs the Sonata with something of a Rachmaninov rarity: the *Variations on a Theme by Chopin*, composed in 1902-03 in the wake of the success of the Second Piano Concerto. 'It contains so much beautiful music, with so many "faces", and makes a really good contrast with the Sonata – though both works often evoke church bells,' says Sudbin. 'It's much leaner in texture; and while many of the variations sound completely Russian, they often feel like Schumann under the hands, especially the last three (which remind me of the *Symphonic Etudes*).

'Rachmaninov wrote three optional variations, including a fugal one, which I've omitted. I also leave out the virtuoso coda Rachmaninov added to raise the applause level. Though it's far less well known, and not easy to bring off as a whole, I find it just as great as the *Corelli Variations*. The problem is that it's had no great advocate in the past. If Horowitz or Van Cliburn had played it, it would probably be famous. To me this music has been a revelation.'

**Richard Wigmore**

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