

# Getting your Rach right

**Stephen Hough** and **Yevgeny Sudbin** are taking part in the Rachmaninov piano series at the Proms. **Jeremy Nicholas** met them to discuss approaches to the composer



**JN** The Proms are presenting all five of Rachmaninov's works for piano and orchestra, the four concertos and *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, in a single season for the first time in 50 years. What makes these works so enduringly popular with audiences? And what are their attractions for the pianist?

**YS** All five are extremely different. I'm doing No 1 which for me is the freshest, the most youthful – after all Rachmaninov was only 17 when he wrote it – and you definitely hear every emotion a young person would experience!

**JN** Stephen, you've recorded all five works. On this occasion you're playing No 2.

**SH** Yes, one interesting thing about No 2 is that it's the only one of the five he didn't revise or cut. I read some early reviews of the *Rhapsody* – both Rachmaninov's performances and those of others – and the critics said what a wonderful piece but it needs cuts! But you couldn't cut the Second even if you wanted to, it's so seamless. And yet it's the least pianistic of them all. It's the only one written before he was a concert pianist – the First is always played in the later revised version. He was not touring playing concerts as he was when he wrote the Third, where you can hear from the orchestration and piano-writing how much more experience he had. The orchestration in No 3 is thinner; you can hear the piano much more easily than in the Second. The Second is the work of a composer rather than the work of a pianist and yet for that very reason, perhaps, it's the most perfect piece of music of the five.

**YS** The most perfect and yet it took him the longest to write. He completed the second and third movements but struggled over the first. But talking of revisions, I've just recorded the original version of the Fourth. He composed it in 1926 then almost immediately revised it.

**SH** There are three versions of the Fourth – the one that Yevgeny's been playing, then the revision of the original, then a completely new version which he did in 1941 which is what everyone plays.

**YS** You mention the texture of the Second not being 100 per cent pianistically comfortable. I found the original of the Fourth terribly awkwardly



**Stephen Hough** has recorded all four concertos for Hyperion (A/04). He plays No 2 on September 6



**Yevgeny Sudbin** recorded a Rachmaninov recital for BIS (11/05). He performs Concerto No 1 on July 24



**Jeremy Nicholas** is an actor, broadcaster and Gramophone critic

written. When I was learning it I was trying to make it more comfortable but of course that's not what Rachmaninov intended! For instance, the build-up to the climax in the first movement doesn't work – you need a second person to play the bass. It's a physical impossibility. The whole concerto is over 100 bars longer in the original.

**SH** I must say I think the slow movement of the Fourth is one of the most moving things I've ever played. On two particular occasions I remember having tears in my eyes, which doesn't normally happen. It's extraordinary how personal that movement is.

**JN** How much can we learn from Rachmaninov's own recordings of these works?

**SH** It's important to have heard them. I have come across students who didn't even know they existed – which is at the opposite end of the scale. I certainly don't think we should say this is the only way to do them, because in the end it would only ever be an imitation. I think if you have radically different views from Rachmaninov's that's OK, as long as you start with some knowledge of those. More important than tempi, there are certain inflections, ways of speech, that you can get from Rachmaninov.

**JN** Some people find Rachmaninov's playing in the concertos too emotionally cool, but the music is emotional enough already. If you play emotional music with your own added emotion then it can often be less affecting – and effective.

**SH** And of course you hear the counterpoint brought out – not in an artificial way. It's not just a melody with stuff going on underneath. There are real strands of colour. That's something we learn from his playing.

**YS** He doesn't just bring out interesting voices, he follows through with them without making them imposing and you hear them as part of the

'Rach Two': the work of a composer rather than a pianist

