

PERSONAL TOUCH

Explosive bravura and white-hot emotion are qualities often associated with Rachmaninov's concertos, but for Russian-born pianist *Yevgeny Sudbin* the key to interpreting this music is sincerity through informed intuition



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IT IS GOOD TO BE AWARE OF biographical details about a composer when studying music, but I am not sure how much this knowledge aids interpretation. The problem I have with books about Rachmaninov's life is the extent to which the authors speculate and inject themselves into the text. This is understandable since Rachmaninov's music is very emotional, so I suppose some biographers feel the need to write in a similarly emotional style. Overall, I have found Geoffrey Norris's book on Rachmaninov most informative.

The Second Piano Concerto put Rachmaninov 'back on the map' as one of the most significant and popular composers of his time. This was an important accomplishment for him personally, given that the premiere of the First Symphony almost completely destroyed his faith in his abilities. Nevertheless, there are still plenty of people who are 'allergic' to the concerto today. I have noticed that the most polarised opinions tend to be about works of art that are of lasting significance.

The Second Concerto is extremely organic due to its long lines, very clear shape and architecture of each movement. It seems pretty perfect in its form, in my opinion, so you can't really change anything (as Rachmaninov kept doing with the other concertos). I find the Third much more 'choppy' in structure and less straightforward in terms of shape and flow, especially in the finale. Most pianists I have spoken with find the Second easier technically, and more comfortable under the hands. I didn't find it easier. For me, the Third required an unusual investment of time to get a feel for it, but then at some point it just 'clicks' and you find yourself at 'the top of the summit', before you become consciously aware of it.

As with many works of this nature, the quantity of notes does not determine difficulty for me, but they sometimes restrict one's ability to find room for a more individual approach. For example, in Ravel or Scriabin, you can often use

thick textures to your advantage to shade, grade and colour; while in Medtner and Rachmaninov, that's not always the case.

Reading through the correspondence between Rachmaninov and Josef Hofmann, the dedicatee of the Third Concerto, one almost senses that the reason he declined to play it was not due to his 'small hands', which was the official reason given, but because he perceived a desire on Rachmaninov's part to inflict some form of pianistic punishment aimed at him. While their admiration for each other was undisputed, Hofmann's refusal to take on the concerto led to a partial falling out between these two most important pianists of the Golden Era.

The Third has so much to offer, but it's the less obvious qualities in this concerto that interest me: there is a lot of detail, subtle emotion and 'leanness' (in a good sense) that can naturally get sidelined by the more obvious desire for explosive bravura and white-hot emotion. The challenge is to find the right balance.

When I play Rachmaninov I can often 'smell' the fresh air of nature and see the vast beauty of Russian landscapes unfold in front of my eyes. This can be especially refreshing when I am on tour, travelling from city to city. I love nature and it's clear that Rachmaninov did too, if not only from his composition but from his letters.

I don't usually listen to recordings of other interpretations when I am preparing for a recording, though I have of course heard Rachmaninov's own interpretations many times in the past so one cannot escape their influence. Still, I tend to be quite stubborn and try to find my own way with pieces. Sometimes I might integrate qualities from other recordings, but this does not happen consciously. I believe in authenticity, by which I mean living through the work and the performance yourself, not necessarily hanging onto tradition or every last clue in the score. This doesn't mean disrespecting the composer's intentions, but it does mean trying to understand their intentions and get into their 'head' as best as you can. In the end you must make it completely your own. As a listener, one of the most obvious things that you can feel but cannot understand or put into words is *sincerity*. This cannot

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be manufactured, practiced or attained by any other means but through informed intuition.

I am often asked whether I regard myself as a 'Russian pianist', but am never quite sure what people mean by this. I am not aware of any one particular school that is distinctly Russian. If it means being 'Russian' in a nationalistic sense, that's definitely not so important to me: I don't feel proud or embarrassed by my heritage nor any special connection to it, except that I love Russian landscapes, architecture, literature and music by Russian composers. Yet I feel just as at home with Mozart or Beethoven as with Rachmaninov. What's most important is the quality of the music, the feelings it evokes and the search for something unique to say about it. ♪

Yevgeny Sudbin's new album of Rachmaninov Piano Concertos Nos 2 & 3 with Sakari Oramo and the BBC Symphony Orchestra is now available from BIS Records (BIS 2338). www.yevgenysudbin.com



Yevgeny Sudbin: 'I love nature and it's clear that Rachmaninov did too'