

SCRIABIN PIANO MUSIC

Volume 2

Polonaise Op. 21
Préludes Op. 22
Sonata No. 3, Op. 23
Mazurkas Op. 25
Préludes Op. 27
Fantasy Op. 28

Oleg Marshev

Volume 1 of Oleg Marshév's Scriabin series broke off in deep Chopin-esque melancholy with the finale of the First Sonata (1892) which so clearly echoes the 'Funeral March' of his model's Second Sonata (1839). From the Polonaise (from 1897) which opens this second volume, the casual listener could be forgiven for assuming that Scriabin's thinking had barely developed during the intervening five years, and perhaps even regressed. The shape and rhythm of the main subject, so proudly announced in bar 6, wears its polonaise identity on its sleeve; and in B flat minor, no less, the very key of Chopin's Second Sonata.

All the same, the first chord of Scriabin's introduction (bar 2) features an E natural-B flat clash of an augmented fourth, the notorious tritone, which marks the piece as unmistakably a product of its time and its composer. Curiously few Scriabin interpreters have followed the example of Vladimir Sofronitsky, Scriabin's son-in-law and supreme exponent of his piano music, in exploring the course of this creative dialogue, as the mature Scriabin emerges almost piece by piece from the work of Chopin.

Undoubtedly responsible for the acceleration of this process, and for much of the composer's subsequent fame, was the patronage of Mitrofan Belyayev, a timber magnate who first heard the 23-year-old Scriabin play the piano in 1894. In short order, Belyayev published several of the young composer's earlier works such as the First Sonata, through the firm he had founded a decade earlier, and further committed to printing whatever his latest protégé saw fit to create. The strings of patronage, however apparently generous, came with conditions to be expected of an astute businessman such as Belyayev, who kept Scriabin on a short leash by demanding that his muse be channelled into popular and publishable genres such as the Polonaise, the preludes and mazurkas found on this volume.

The two men travelled to Paris, on Belyayev's dime, where the pale, slender Scriabin was welcomed with open arms by the Parisian demimonde. Amid the salon haze of chartreuse, opium and general debauchery, the hypersensitive Russian – with the physique and affected mannerisms of a ballerina – was instantly hailed as the embodiment of decadence. Meeting a mysterious beauty in the French capital, he was inspired to write a Piano Concerto, but the liaison came to nothing, much to his chagrin.

Shortly thereafter, however, the concerto found its way onto the music-stand of the next woman in Scriabin's life. In January 1897, just after Scriabin's 25th birthday, a certain Vera Ivanovna Isakovich set about creating a two-piano arrangement of the piece, frequently playing through it alongside the composer himself. Vera had met Scriabin at the home of her piano teacher, Paul de Schloezer. Vera was de Schloezer's star pupil and an ardent admirer of Scriabin's music even before meeting him in person. She won Scriabin's heart in a matter of days, and in the most effective way possible: by confessing her admiration and expressing a desire to learn from him. Finally being recognized as a master—even a genius—healed Alexander's broken heart quite rapidly; here was someone who truly understood him. That same winter, he asked for Vera's hand in marriage.

'His fiancée is a nice girl, to be sure. If she were the right one, everything would lead to a calm and happy life. But is she the right one?' So wrote Scriabin's aunt (effectively parent), Lyubov Aleksandrovna Scriabina, to Belyayev. 'To my horror, I realize that Alexander can never, anywhere, find happiness,' continued Lyubov Aleksandrovna, though she did note in a postscript that the 26-year-old Scriabin had at least become independent enough to trim his own fingernails for the first time in his life, without being told to do so.

Belyayev was genuinely concerned, likely due to the increasingly frantic correspondence from Lyubov Aleksandrovna, who feared losing her influence over the young man. 'It is always like this, just before the birth of a new musical idea,' she wrote. 'I sat beside him all night long. How terrible it was to see him suffer so. And then, at daybreak, he played something with such a radiant, blissful look on his face...'

It was after this particular night that the tiny Prelude Op.22 No.1 came into being – betraying hardly a trace of its painful birth-pangs in its arpeggiated distillation of a complex theme. Briefer still, the other three preludes in the Op.22 set advertise their chromaticism in key-signatures heavy with sharps, at least until the comparatively placid rise and fall of No.4 in B minor.

In an attempt to scotch the relationship between Alexander and Vera, Lyubov Aleksandrovna wrote to Belyayev claiming that Vera's family consisted of Jewish shopkeepers. Belyayev, too, began to suspect that the impending marriage might be bad for business: Alexander's handwriting was becoming illegible, and his correspondence sloppy. Such concerns became academic once the couple married in August 1897. They went to Paris, where Scriabin began work on what became his Third Sonata. He completed it the following summer, on a country estate at Maidanovov, shortly before taking up a post as professor of piano at the Moscow Conservatoire.

If one was looking to counter perennial criticism of Scriabin as a solipsistic poet of sound, lost in his own dreams, then the formal clarity of the finished Sonata would serve as solid proof of his credentials as a composer who had something to teach. As much as it later gained an extravagant extra-musical narrative (written probably not by the composer but by his second wife, Tatiana de Schloezer), the four-movement Third is unified by a cyclic reinterpretation of classic sonata form, in which the themes of each movement relate to one another in a fashion familiar from the major works of (to take a notable example) César Franck. The main theme of the first movement plays a significant role in the transition between the third and fourth movements; and the motif from the close of the first movement returns in the coda of the finale, fused with a version of the dreamy-delicate theme of the third movement. And if the Sonata's overall mood is turbulent, this *Andante* offers serene and satisfying contrast with one of Scriabin's most eloquent themes.

With the Mazurkas Op.25 of 1899 we return to the heritage of Chopin, but the magnetic pull of Scriabin's own style is immediately stronger, in the harmonic slippage of No.1's opening, and the skittish rhythm of its B section. In length and harmonic richness, these pieces have outgrown their model to strike a note of the 'rural miniature' within musical modernism, in which the pastoral is imbued with the nostalgic, as postcard-sized souvenirs of a lost landscape. In so doing, Scriabin anticipates by almost 30 years the late-period mazurkas of Chopin's pre-eminent successor in Poland, Karol Szymanowski,

By this point, Scriabin's horizons were expanding along with his post-tonal vocabulary, and in the summer of 1899 he took Vera and their two children off to a country dacha to work on a symphony which became Op.26, replete with a supra-Wagnerian vocal finale in which the chorus exhorts: 'Come, O peoples, praise art forever, glorious art!' The public did not take up the invitation. Undeterred either by its reception or by Belyayev's reluctance to risk his fortune publishing the work, Scriabin soon began work on the Second Symphony Op.29.

Falling directly between the two symphonies, the Preludes Op.27 (1901) and Fantasia Op.28 (1900) also shed another layer of 'influence' along the composer's self-directed journey towards the state of exalted visionary by which, for better or worse, he is commonly known today. All the same, the scores of the Op.27 Preludes still present an attractive and realistic prospect to the advanced amateur pianists who were Belyayev's principal market. The Fantasia is another matter, rising through the expressive scale of its three themes: the first brooding, the second soaring, the third proto-cosmic in scope. The sublime excess of Scriabin's Third Symphony, 'Le Divin Poème', is around the corner, along with such pronouncements as 'I am God,' made to the startled Sergei Taneyev. But he is not there yet, and the Fantasia wraps up its tri-thematic discourse in the kind of coruscating pianistic virtuosity which caps the 19th century and the music of Liszt and Tchaikovsky.

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Oleg Marshev

Gramophone considered Oleg Marshev's first album of Prokofiev on Danacord (DACOCD391) as featuring 'one of the most authoritative and impassioned performances [of the First Sonata] on disc so far'. His interpretation of the 'War' Sonata trilogy was awarded a 'Classic CD Choice' and compared with pillars of the gramophone such as Richter, Berman and Ashkenazy.

Born in Baku, Azerbaijan, Oleg Marshev trained with Valentina Aristova at the Gnessin State Musical College and with Mikhail Voskresensky at the Moscow Conservatoire. He is numbered among the fifth generation of Russian pianism since Liszt, through the lineage of Alexander Siloti, Konstantin Igumnov and Voskresensky's teacher, Lev Oborin. Resident in Italy since 1991, Marshev received awards in several international piano competitions in Canada, Italy, Portugal, Spain, USA, including four first prizes.

He is now widely acknowledged as one of the most talented Russian pianists of his generation.

In 1991 Marshev made an acclaimed New York debut with a recital at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall. The following year he first appeared at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw which led to other invitations to perform at this prestigious hall. Since then he has given recitals and concerts across the world at venues such as Wigmore Hall of London, the Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli Festival of Brescia-Bergamo, Italy, the Klavier Festival Ruhr, Germany, and La Roque d'Anthéron. Alongside his concert engagements, Marshev regularly gives masterclasses in many different countries and is a Professor at the Anton Bruckner University in Linz.

Oleg Marshev began his distinguished recording career with the complete original works for solo piano by Prokofiev (5 CDs) for Danacord Records. He has since made over 35 albums for the same label, featuring works by Schubert, Brahms, Ravel, Strauss, Rubinstein, Rachmaninov and others. His six-volume series of Emil von Sauer's complete piano music was a notable first on records, and he was among the first pianists to have recorded the complete works for piano and orchestra by the great 'Russian Four' of Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov, Prokofiev and Shostakovich; Chopin and Mendelssohn have also been the subject of complete concertante editions. His interest in little-known and forgotten music has yielded a 4 CD album of Danish romantic piano concertos.

Marshev's recordings have been positively received by leading international publications. 'Marshev is a phenomenon,' wrote *BBC Music Magazine* of his Shostakovich concertos. 'Master of every mood from strip-cartoon crispness to thundering monster, but above all a controlling sensibility of intelligence and feeling.'

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Aleksander Nikolayevich Scriabin (1872-1915)

[1] Polonaise in B flat minor, Op. 21
(1897) 6:50

4 Preludes Op. 22 (1897) 4:46

- [2] No. 1 in G sharp minor – Andante 1:34
- [3] No. 2 in C sharp minor – Andante 1:13
- [4] No. 3 in B major – Allegretto 1:07
- [5] No. 4 in B minor – Andantino 0:56

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F sharp minor, Op. 23 (1897-1898) 19:06

- [6] I. Drammatico 5:59
- [7] II. Allegretto 2:36
- [8] III. Andante 4:45
- [9] IV. Presto con fuoco 5:51

9 Mazurkas Op. 25 (1898-1899) 30:53

- [10] No. 1 in F minor – Allegro 3:07
- [11] No. 2 in C major – Allegretto 3:15
- [12] No. 3 in E minor – Lento 2:44
- [13] No. 4 in E major – Vivo 3:48
- [14] No. 5 in C sharp minor – Agitato 4:21
- [15] No. 6 in F sharp major – Allegretto 2:54
- [16] No. 7 in F sharp minor – Moderato 5:11
- [17] No. 8 in B major – Allegretto 2:18
- [18] No. 9 in E flat minor – Mesto 3:18

2 Preludes Op. 27 (1900-1901) 3:02

- [19] No. 1 in G minor – Patetico 2:05
- [20] No. 2 in C B major – Andante 1:02

[21] Fantasy in F sharp minor, Op. 28 (1900) 9:06

Oleg Marshev, piano