

Viola arrangement of the *Melodie, Op.3 No.3* by Sergei Rachmaninoff

by Viacheslav Dinerchtein

The *Melodie, Op.3 No.3* belongs to Rachmaninoff's early cycle of five short pieces for piano solo, which he compiled under the name of *Morceaux de fantaisie* (Fantasy Pieces). Written near the end of 1892, the set was dedicated to Rachmaninoff's composition teacher at the Moscow Conservatory, Anton Arensky.

The setting in which the composition was born was quite peculiar. The nineteen-year-old had recently graduated from the Moscow Conservatory with the rare and prestigious Great Gold Medal. His latest conservatory composition, the opera *Aleko*, although rated modestly by its author¹, was at once embraced by the Bolshoi Theatre and staged with the great bass singer Fyodor Chaliapin. Also around that time Rachmaninoff's gifts as both virtuoso pianist and composer were spotted by Tchaikovsky, who got personally involved in promoting the young talent's career.² What may appear an exciting time full of hope and promise also had a hidden side. As Rachmaninoff confesses in a letter to a close family friend: "My silence was caused by difficulties in my life, and this is the truth. I carry with me a large burden of grief, although there is no point to dwell on it [...] My father lives the most senseless life; my mother is gravely ill; my older brother accumulates debts, which God alone knows how he is to repay (little hope can be placed on me now); my younger brother is awfully lazy and will surely fail his school year; my grandmother is at the point of death [...] You will tell me over and over: "Take treatments." But is moral pain treatable? Can one change one's nervous system? I did try heavy drinking for several days, but it did not help and I promised myself never to drink like that again [...] Please destroy this letter after reading it [...]"³

The daily anxiety naturally claimed its toll on the creative output: between April 1892, when *Aleko* was completed⁴ and December 1892 Rachmaninoff did not complete a single opus. What pulled him out of the impasse was an interview with Tchaikovsky, published in early December, in which Tchaikovsky reflects on eventually giving up composition to make way to younger talents. Asked by the astonished interviewer whether such talents existed, Tchaikovsky replied affirmatively, naming Glazunov in Petersburg, and Rachmaninoff and Arensky in Moscow.⁵ The episode gave Rachmaninoff the much needed boost and played a decisive role in the completion of the *Opus 3*. In Rachmaninoff's own words from that week: "[Tchaikovsky's appraisal] brought me true joy. As soon as I finished reading the article, I sat down at the piano and composed a fifth piece [of the *Morceaux de fantaisie*]. Now I will publish five pieces."⁶

The cycle was Rachmaninoff's first take on composing for the piano solo, and it was also his first opus as a graduated "free artist". In desperate need of income, he accepted a single miserably low publishing fee with no copyright attached (Russia did not yet recognize the international copyright law). Little did he know that the *Prelude in C-sharp minor (Op.3 No.2)*, which precedes the *Melodie* in the set, was about to spread like a wild fire across the world - precisely thanks to the lack of copyright protection - bringing him fame and paving the way for his prodigious career in the West. As far as unauthorised free editions is concerned, the anarchy went rampant. With the original musical text rarely followed, the *Melodie's* neighbour was published under titles such as *The Bells of Moscow*, *The Burning of Moscow*, *The Day of Judgement*,⁷ and in all possible and impossible instrumental arrangements, including a version for a trombone orchestra and one for banjo or mandoline solo. The *Prelude* was one single piece Rachmaninoff was doomed to play as a compulsory encore for the rest of his professional life, and it completely eclipsed the other short pieces from the original *Opus 3* set.⁸

The first performance of the *Morceaux de fantaisie* took place ahead of its publication, at the Moscow Electrical Exhibition on December 28, 1892, with Rachmaninoff himself on the piano. The pieces were met

1 Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Literaturnoe nasledie* [Literary heritage: reminiscences, articles, letters], comp. Z. Apenian (Moscow: Sovetskiy Kompozitor, 1978), 188.

2 Ibid., 195. Rachmaninoff writes that Tchaikovsky told him that he, Rachmaninoff, was born under a lucky star.

3 Ibid., 211.

4 Ibid., 189.

5 Ibid., 517.

6 Ibid., 205.

7 Max Harrison, *Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings* (London: Continuum, 2004), 72-73.

8 In regard to this prelude, Rachmaninoff said later in his career "I think other preludes are far better music than my first Prelude, but the public has shown no disposition to share my belief." (See Rachmaninoff, *Literaturnoe nasledie*, 77).

with great enthusiasm, one critic labeling them *chefs d'oeuvre*, to which Tchaikovsky, upon meeting Rachmaninoff, jokingly reacted: "So, Seryozha, I heard you've been already writing *chefs d'oeuvre*?"⁹

It is also documented that Tchaikovsky received the manuscript of the *Opus 3* before it was published, and in a letter to Rachmaninoff's relative spoke highly of the cycle, singling out the *Prelude in C-sharp minor* and the *Melodie*.¹⁰

Rachmaninoff left for posterity his own interpretation of the *Melodie* on his first Ampico roll recordings of 1919-1920. Twenty years later he revisited the score of the piece, creating a virtually new version of it. But the original, which is the basis of the present viola arrangement, never lost its appeal among the pianists.

A few words about the arrangement itself: The transcription aims at taking advantage of the wealth of expressive possibilities inherent in a melodic instrument. By coincidence, most of the solo line from the original *Melodie* fits into the range of the viola, making it more apt for this particular instrument than for other members of the string family.

Any arrangement is by definition a detour from the original version, which also means compromises. In the original piano version of the *Opus 3*, the melody is surrounded and protected by an accompaniment of the same timbre. By tearing the solo line out of its lush texture, we admittedly simplify the original conception. On the other hand, however, its melodic quality gains in richness and flexibility when granted to a string instrument – after all, there is a limit to what can happen to any given note once it is struck on the piano. With that in mind, it seems to me that the very core of the *Melodie*, its singing quality, stays very much preserved in this new constellation.

The arrangement of *Melodie* has been transposed a semitone higher. While the overall range remains practically the same, the viola's natural resonance in F-major emphasizes the melodic sonority better than it would in the original E-major. As an added bonus, the last note of the solo line can now conveniently fall into place as a harmonic.

As for interpretation, *Melodie* is a virtual ocean for exploration. In terms of its dynamic construction, the present arrangement follows an outline that can be found in most printed piano editions. It must be noted, however, that Rachmaninoff left no dynamic markings on the manuscript, and those that appear in print were added by editors. Given the meticulous markings of the neighbouring *Prelude*, we can presume that Rachmaninoff deliberately left his *Melodie* open to multiple interpretations. The same infinite freedom of choice concerns the general tempo and perfectly conceivable departures from it. The possibilities are endless and the performer is pushed into taking initiatives on every possible level.

Because the bowings and fingerings are irremediably attached to one's interpretation of the piece, the suggested performance markings should be treated with a grain of salt and questioned. In my own case, frequent changes are commonplace even for an established interpretation, and so I do much hope the performer of this piece will firmly disagree with my choices of the moment.

The arrangement is dedicated, with love and admiration, to my former mentor Joseph de Pasquale.

9 *Vospominaniya o Rachmaninove* [Reminiscences on Rachmaninoff], comp. A. Ossovsky (Moscow: Muzyka, 1974), 28.

10 Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Literaturnoe nasledie* [Literary heritage: reminiscences, articles, letters], comp. Z. Apenian (Moscow: Sovetskiy Kompozitor, 1978), 518.