

The Rachmaninov Challenge

Difficult to play and perceived as 'old-fashioned', yet there is so much more to Rachmaninov's music, argues pianist Leif Ove Andsnes



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Leif Ove Andsnes

Rachmaninov is a major challenge for pianists. He was one of the greatest pianists who ever lived and he was famous for having large hands, so there's a lot of chordal writing and an array of technical challenges. But at the same time it's such great music and it's a physical pleasure to play because it's so well written for the piano. I always start working on a big concerto months before I'm going to play it. I start with the more difficult passages, the things that take time to find the right fingerings, and then the music comes as you work on the technique.

It's such a treasure to have recordings of Rachmaninov playing his own music. It's especially important for us to hear them because he was such a great pianist and also because I think pianistic traditions have changed quite a bit. People often make this music too percussive and too vertical for my tastes. Rachmaninov made waves in the music, starting quietly and building it up, and there is always movement and rubato in his playing. Today maybe some of these rubatos might feel a little foreign, or a little old-fashioned, even if Rachmaninov was a very modern pianist for his time, but I think we can learn so much from that flexibility.

There is still a feeling among a lot of musicians that this is slightly second-rate music because it is so beautiful and so romantic and he wrote it at a time when the world was occupied with more modern ideas. But there is so much more to this music – there is a bittersweet quality to

it, there is darkness and light, the orchestration is fantastic. And it is never sentimental. There are beautiful melodies, but also, and more importantly, there are counter-melodies that go with them, so that it becomes a rich world. The beginning of the Third Concerto, for instance, has these very small intervals, like a flower opening up. As we go further, the intervals get bigger and bigger, and the melodies seem to become grander. What he's doing with the melodic material is so clever. The Fourth Concerto doesn't have the long, sweeping melodies of the Second and Third – there are shorter, more fragmented melodies, but the harmonies are there. It's more secretive, and the harmonic language is richer than ever. It's kind of an enigma, this concerto, but such a beautiful enigma!

Leif Ove Andsnes performs...

Thu 29 Apr 7.30pm Barbican Hall
Liadov The Enchanted Lake
Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No 4
Copland Symphony No 3
Antonio Pappano conductor

For full details and to watch a video of Leif Ove Andsnes's interview visit Iso.co.uk/200910season

You can hear more Rachmaninov later in the season when Vladimir Feltsman performs Piano Concerto No 3 on Wednesday 16 June at 7.30pm.