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# MARIA RAZUMOVSKAYA





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HEN SVIATOSLAV RICHTER was asked to perform in a chamber music recital of Dmitri Shostakovich's works at short notice, he stood aghast. 'There's no time! It takes a long time to learn.' This remark seems strange given that Richter's ability to memorise entire operas almost after single hearings had earned him the reputation of a musical genius. Indeed, Richter's famous premiere of Sergei Prokofiev's fiendish Seventh Piano Sonata in B flat major, Op 83, in 1943 was prepared for performance and committed to memory in the seemingly impossible time of only four days. His hesitation about whether or not to accept the Shostakovich recital was not driven by the lack of time to prepare the notes, but in his fear that he had not enough time to bring together in his mind the tacit network of literary ideas which acted as the scaffold for his interpretational concept: '[Nikolai] Gogol has a lot in common with Shostakovich [but] it's so difficult how to construct this idea all the way through. All I know is it clearly has to end with Gogol burning his manuscripts. He prays. Deliriously.'

The reliance on a literary work as a base for the trajectory of either a singular work, or more





ambitiously an entire recital, has been an important idea to many Russian pianists of the twentieth century. Heinrich Neuhaus admitted he needed to think of an amalgamation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Karamazov Brothers* with the poetry of Adam Mickiewicz and Boris Pasternak to underpin elements of his Chopin interpretations. Maria Yudina supported her performances of Brahms's Opus 116 *Intermezzi* with the poetry of Mikhail Lermontov.

What is so revealing about these approaches is that they are unafraid to liberate the music from its time and context. There is no evidence to suggest any intended link between Gogol and Shostakovich's chamber music writing just as there is little possibility that Brahms would have even known, let alone thought about the poetry of Lermontov when writing his miniatures. Yet, these pianists genuinely believed it to be inconceivable to produce their interpretations without such personal associations. Indeed, 'personal' is the key word here.

It is difficult enough to define something so personal. In any case, by right, it is not something every performer will agree to share. To try and explain how these elusive literary associations shape

an interpretation with any degree of objectivity is probably impossible — maybe unnecessary. A musical performance is an abstract phenomenon. It should 'speak' of itself to a listener whether or not the performer reveals his network of thoughts supporting it. This does not take away from the fact, however, that a performer can believe these thoughts to be vital to the success of his or her interpretation. My own thoughts about this type of artistic practice — which makes the projection of the self into one's performance the primary consideration - turned to Thomas Mann, who assumed the position that personal significance arises when we care enough about something that we commit it to our art. In allowing Thomas Mann to become a personally significant part of my approach to an entire programme and its recording process, it was not an influence which stopped me thinking about the composers presented. Instead, Thomas Mann offered me what he described in 'A Stroll by the Shore' of his The Magic Mountain as a 'knowing forgetfulness'. It provided that 'tenderly booming din [that] closes our ears against every other voice in the world' felt walking along the ocean's shore.





AN ONE NARRATE TIME — time as such, in and of itself?' These words appeared in print in 1924 in the heart of Thomas Mann's epic novel *The Magic Mountain*. Mann provocatively brushed aside the question as a 'foolish undertaking' since surely the narration would simply go: 'Time passed, ran on, flowed in a mighty stream ...' Yet, musing over this question Mann proposes two perspectives on time that make it possible to 'narrate about time' — one which can only present itself as a 'movement toward and end [...] a segment of human earthly existence'; the other, present only in narrative, becomes an imaginary time of 'content'.

The 'time' of content often surpasses real time. The desynchronisation of these times is not in-itself a new discovery. Lacking words, musicians have been endlessly attempting to reconcile these different, abstract perspectives of time. Music comes into being through its performance in the concert hall or recording, but as summarised by Ferruccio Busoni: 'The musical work of art exists whole and intact

before it has sounded and after the sound is finished. It is, at the same time, in and out of Time.'

The works on this recording are all testaments to the human desire to narrate about time; the determination to speak as an individual that makes us belong to time, and the understanding that the things we most wish to communicate through art are common to all and so are, in fact, timeless. We imagine that all our personal narratives must have a beginning and an end, and are concerned that our narratives capture the essence and spirit 'of our time'. We are aware that to some our narrative will appear 'ahead of our time', to others a memory of a 'past' time. However the narrative of 'our' time is received, it slips through the real moment and dissolves into that grander, impersonal unit of imagined time called progress, and grander still eternity. But, the concept of eternity as something beyond our own narratives is itself an illusion. Returning our thoughts to The Magic Mountain: 'It's as if we're being led around by the nose, in a circle, always lured on by the promise of something that is just another turning point – a turning point in a circle. For a circle consists of nothing but elastic turning points, and so its curvature is immeasurable [...] and so eternity is not 'straight ahead, straight ahead', but rather 'merry-go-round' [...] The practical joke of the circle, of eternity that has no permanent direction, but in which everything keeps coming back.'

GREAT musician-thinker, and sympathetic to the ideas of Thomas Mann, Ferruccio Busoni fervently explored the possibilities of narrating about time. Busoni's essays, *The Essence of* 

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*Music*, show a creator striving to look into the future of music. Somewhat ironically perhaps, his most enduring works arose through his synthesis of himself with Johann Sebastian Bach — the horizon of an imminent future of music meeting seamlessly (a turning point in a circle) with music's symbolic beginning.

Busoni turned to Bach not only to form his compositional language, but also to define the achievement of a virtuoso pianist. Producing a collection of edited works for aspiring pianists, Busoni traces a journey from Bach's Inventions and Preludes and Fugues to virtuoso works including Liszt's Mephisto Waltz. The final test in this collection, the touchstone for the virtuoso pianist, was the Bach-Busoni Chaconne in D minor. Composed in 1893 it joins an illustrious list of transcriptions of the original violin work for the piano including Johannes Brahms's more puritan version for the left hand. Busoni's Chaconne is not merely a translation of a great masterpiece from one medium to another in a bravura style. He considered the concept of transcription with great seriousness. Both composition and performance adapted another's ideas to fit to personal ones and thus, according to Busoni, both activities were those of transcription.

Busoni's *Chaconne* openly severs any pretence of capturing the characteristics of the violin. Using the full potential of the modern piano, with an unmistakably contrapuntal feel that derives from the organ, Busoni guides the pianist through his unique and formidable keyboard style. From the first sounds, we know we are going on a long and powerful journey through every element of human emotion, and pianistically through every possible technical means.

It is the journey of a simple eight bars which find the ability to develop in seemingly endless variation: eight bars that transcend far beyond their formal time. Only when we are jolted by the final return of the majestic opening at the end, do we suddenly sense how much we have been through whilst engrossed in the chordal narrative whose statement takes so little time.

Notwithstanding the popularity of the Chaconne, Busoni had considered his most successful concert work for piano to be his Fantasia nach J S Bach. Composed in 1909 it was the first of a new genre of works by Busoni which he called Nachdichtung a poem in the manner of another poet. In his own words: 'Form, imagination and feeling are indispensable to the artist, they are the most precious of all things — those to which he offers sacrifice — the sacrifice of himself. These things I put into my work of [Bach's transcription] and in that way it became my own. I believed I was acting in accordance with the spirit of Bach when I placed the latest possibilities of our present-day art in the service of his plan.' Blurring the boundary of original composition and transcription, the work is a son's gratitude to his father for being introduced to the music of Bach. Beginning within an original improvisatory theme, Busoni moved on to offer transcriptions of the first, second and seventh sections from Bach's chorale partita Christ, der du bist der helle Tag (BWV 766), a fughetta on Gottes Sohn ist kommen (BWV 703) and the chorale prelude Lob sei den allmächtigen Gott (BWV 602). Upon a tumultuous climax the chorale becomes more fragmented, and finally dissipates back into the contemporary strains from which it started.

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HE FUSION of structure and fantasy mirrors our human drive to divide the fluid nature of time into lucid frameworks: to give form to a moment in time which has inevitably already slipped 'out of time'. Musicians of the generation of Mozart and Beethoven would proclaim the master of such juxtapositions to be 'Bach the Great'. Yet, where today we commonly suppose this to be Johann Sebastian, he had at that point all but faded into oblivion and the reference was to his son, Carl Philipp Emanuel. The free Fantasia in F sharp minor, H300 (Wg67), composed in 1787 is one of his last and longest works in the genre. Bearing the subtitle C P E Bachs Empfindungen the style of the work was captured by Dr Charles Burney's famous portrait of the composer playing the clavichord: 'He played with little intermission, until near 11 o'clock at night [...] During this time, he grew so animated and possessed, that he not only played but looked like one inspired. His eyes were fixed, his under lip fell, and drops of effervescence distilled from his countenance.' Breaking off in the middle of an eccentric idea and rambling through fragmented motifs, C P E Bach's autograph is unified in its cyclical return to the austere opening chords: spread over three staves, with no time signature or bar lines, it is a testament to the struggle of prescribing time to a narrative which had never tried to be either 'in time' nor of its time.

Y THE END of the nineteenth century the flair for improvisation which had been such an important part of earlier models of musicianship was giving way. Sergei Rachmaninov's

astonishing facility in memorising music and effortless technique gave him the time to improvise and experiment at the piano. Written in 1892 at the age of nineteen, the hauntingly simple **Élégie**, Op 3 No 1, started out as one such improvisation. Taking its place in a cycle five piano pieces, *Morceaux de Fantaisie*, dedicated to his harmony teacher Anton Arensky it already shows the trademarks of Rachmaninov's mature artistic voice. Rachmaninov said that when he composed, he was reflecting his own time: 'My desire to compose music is actually the urge within me to give tonal expression to me feelings, just as I speak to give utterance to my thoughts [...] A composer's







music should express the country of his birth, his love affairs, his religions, the books which have influenced him, the pictures he loves [...] the product of the sum total of his experiences.' Yet, socially and politically the world around him was rapidly changing. Whereas his near contemporary Busoni looked for a new future in music, Rachmaninov composed little after leaving his homeland in the wake of the Russian Revolution: 'Losing my country I lost myself also.' What unites both pianists however, is their commitment to a common journey of narrating from the piano in a way that builds on the new age of expression defined by Ferenc Liszt.

ACH is the Alpha of pianoforte composition and Liszt the Omega.' These were the decisive words that Busoni had used to sum up the importance of the Hungarian composer. At his time, Busoni was one of the few people who had publicly raised Liszt's significance above that of the piano-virtuoso, and saw him as a genius whose 'pianoforte work draws into its circle the musical compositions of all languages, nations, and epochs from Palestrina to Parsifal; Liszt recreated what he took from them - a creator in a double sense.' In the years following Liszt's retirement from the concert stage, at the age of just thirty-six, he began work on one of his greatest works of time-travel, Harmonies poétiques et religieuses. Taking its name from a group of poems by Alphonse de Lamartine, it is a collection which moves between arrangements of Christian plain-chant and original compositions. Against a backdrop of the ancient, the collection contains some of Liszt's most innovative harmony through which, in his own words, he had 'thrown [his] lance far into the future'.

One of the most famous pieces from this set is **Funérailles**. Carrying the subtitle 'October 1849' it is a late addition to a cycle of otherwise timeless titles. Composed in the aftermath of the failed Hungarian uprising against the Hapsburg rule, it is a powerful tribute to those whose lives were taken by the conflict (including his friends Prince Felix Lichnowsky, Count László Teleki and the Hungarian Prime Minister Count Lajos Batthyány). Against the terrors of the opening knell, the desolate march and thundering cavalry that emerge from the darkness of F minor, Liszt transforms these motifs into some of the most





vulnerable but beautiful melodic writing for the piano — a voice of comfort spoken through tears. Being the recipient of Hungary's Sabre of Honour, it was only a few years before that Liszt had declaimed that it was up to artists to heal the wounds of conflict: 'The sword, once used so heroically in defence of our country, has fallen into humble and peaceful hands. Is it not a symbol? Hungary [...] now calls on the arts, on literature, on the sciences, all partisans of peace [...] to toil with the mind and hands towards a higher vision.'

Initially perhaps seeming out of place in such a cycle, *Funérailles* is in fact a poignant tribute to all humanity that transcends the specificity implied by dates. Opening his cycle with Lamartine's poetry, Liszt is clear that the chasm between the personal and universal may not be as wide as at first it seems: 'There are hearts broken by sorrow, held back by the world, who take refuge in the world of their thoughts, in solitude of soul, to weep, to wait or to worship; I would that they might be visited by a muse solitary like them, to find sympathy in her harmonies and to say sometimes, as they listen: We pray with your words, we weep with your tears, we call on God with your songs!'

Something of an epic poem for the piano, Liszt's Vallée d'Obermann formed part of his artistic wanderings which he set down through the cycle Années de pèlerinage. Composed at the time when he had travelled to Switzerland to get away from the pressures and expectations of cosmopolitan Paris, it was Liszt's way of documenting his engagement with the thoughts of other figures as he sought to define his own life. It is a symbolic valley in which the novelist Étienne de Senancour traces the thoughts of his protagonist, Obermann, as he reflects on existence: 'What do I want? Who am I? What do I ask of nature'. In the carefully selected literary prefaces to the piece, Liszt relates to Obermann's ideas that existence is defined by living in the individual moment – that only what we feel can be true. Yet, the triumph of Vallée d'Obermann, as it overturns the bleak descending melody into a radiant torrent, is the realisation that this moment, this truth of feeling, is worth fighting for.

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OOKING AT THESE IDEAS we see that a narration about time, is a narration about significance.

Closing this recording's journey is Busoni's haunting transcription of J S Bach's Chorale

Prelude 'Ich ruf' zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ' ('I call on you, Lord Jesus Christ'). Melting away in the contented sounds of F major — the relative key of the opening Chaconne's somber D minor — it brings the recital back a full circle. It is a simple prayer that our actions now might be those that we wish to reflect us today and thereafter. As the narratives of Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain intensify, significance is given to a gramophone record whose circular journey under the stylus preserves a small moment in time which now speaks outside and beyond its time:

Let us put it this way: an object created by the human spirit and intellect, which means a significant object, is 'significant' in that it points beyond itself, is an expression and exponent of a more universal spirit and intellect, of a whole world of feelings and ideas that have found a more or less perfect image of themselves in that object ... Moreover, love for such an object is itself equally 'significant'. It says something about the person who feels it, it defines his relationship to the universe, to the world represented by the created object, and, whether consciously or unconsciously, loved along with it.

When we care, we become significant. Narrating about time we are empowered: we stand both 'in and out of Time'.

Maria Razumovskaya, 2016

ESCRIBED AS A PIANIST OF 'exquisitely cast virtuosity' and 'sublime poetic vision' Maria Razumovskaya received her pianistic training in the class of Rustem Hayroudinoff at the Royal Academy of Music in London. Subsequently, she undertook further studies with Professor Dmitri Alexeev as an AHRC and RCM scholar at the Royal College of Music. She gained her PhD in 2015 for her work on Heinrich Neuhaus.



