

Man for all the people

Many experts have little time for Rachmaninov just because his music is so popular. Is this fair? Jessica Duchon talks to pianist and conductor Vladimir Ashkenazy and film-maker Tony Palmer

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Vladimir Ashkenazy is angry. The object of his vitriol is a review in a Berlin newspaper following a performance of Sergei Rachmaninov's Third Symphony. "The headline was: Dr Zhivago's Music. Just like that, dismissing it like film music. I thought, 'You miserable idiots! There is so much in this symphony - can you not hear it?' I think it's unbelievably arrogant, so small-minded."

The anecdote illustrates the unusual stigma that has beset the music of Rachmaninov for decades. While some composers suffer from being unjustly neglected, Rachmaninov's problem is quite the opposite.

It's not simply that he's too popular; but more precisely, that certain pieces, notably the Second and Third Piano Concertos, are so popular that they are played endlessly (partly thanks to the films *Brief Encounter* and *Shine*), and likewise a small selection from his prolific output for solo piano. Those works seem to have squeezed the rest of his music out of the concert halls - from solo songs to substantial symphonies, choral music and operas. Meanwhile, many critics and administrators remain sceptical about anything quite so popular and communicative.

Therefore the forthcoming festival at the South Bank Centre, *Hidden Perspectives: Rediscovering the Music of Rachmaninov*, under the artistic direction of Ashkenazy and the centre's head of classical music, Amelia Freedman, is apparently the first substantial festival of his music in London - 56 years after the composer's death. Hopefully it will start to bring Rachmaninov the all-round recognition that his music deserves.

Most composer festivals are motivated by an anniversary - this, however, is an exception. There is no timely "excuse" for giving Rachmaninov a major celebration. So, why Rachmaninov? Why now? The current millennial atmosphere seems to celebrate diversity and accessibility; could it be that the moment is right because the critical attitude that has so denigrated Rachmaninov has begun to disintegrate?

"I hope so," says Ashkenazy. "But any time is a good time for great music. I love Rachmaninov very much and I think it's of paramount importance to promote serious music. It has always been, I'm sure, but maybe today in particular there are too many distractions from important things in life, with so much emphasis on high-tech communication, the internet and so on. It's too easy to think of these superficial things as an end in themselves. Do they bring anything of spiritual value? I don't think so. Whenever we can remind people of eternal values, we should do it. And if a cycle of Rachmaninov can bring something like this closer to people's hearts, why not? Rachmaninov's music has eternal values - therefore it should always be available to people."

The festival features Ashkenazy conducting the Philharmonia orchestra in three concerts of orchestral, choral and operatic works, with some of the world's most celebrated Russian pianists - Evgeny Kissin, Arcadi Volodos and Mikhail Pletnev - as soloists in the piano concertos. There are two concerts of chamber music and one of songs by Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky; a programme of music for two pianos played by Nikolai Demidenko and Dmitri Alexeev; piano recitals by Evgeny Kissin and Nikolai Lugansky; and choral music from the St Petersburg Chamber Choir. A major new documentary about Rachmaninov by Tony Palmer will have its first UK screening, followed by a discussion forum with Palmer, Ashkenazy, critic and Rachmaninov scholar Geoffrey Norris and Alexander Bazikov, director of the Rachmaninov Institute in Tambov. Ashkenazy and the Philharmonia will also be touring Britain with concerts focusing on Rachmaninov.

Amelia Freedman explains the festival's rationale: "I wanted to show the full range of Rachmaninov's works. There is so much superb music that remains comparatively unknown, beyond those few famous pieces. It's also very important to remember where Rachmaninov came from. He is really the last of the great Russian romantics - he was inspired very much by Rimsky-Korsakov and Tchaikovsky. He is a 19th-century Russian and this identity lies at the core of his music."

Rachmaninov was born on 1 April 1873 into a family troubled by his father's drinking and gambling. His parents separated when he was a child; his sister Sofiya died of diphtheria; and while he was a student at the Moscow Conservatoire, he had to live for some time in his piano teacher's apartment, where he was regimented into a fearsome practice routine beginning daily at 6am. His compositional abilities were best stimulated by his cousins' estate, Ivanovka, in the remote Russian countryside; it was in this idyllic retreat, far from the pressures and disappointments of the metropolis, that he wrote much of his best music. He married his cousin Natalia, and his rising reputation as both composer and pianist soon began to take him on foreign tours through Europe and America.

In 1917 the Rachmaninovs fled to Stockholm to escape the Revolution. They moved first to Copenhagen, then to America; eventually they settled in Switzerland beside Lake Lucerne, in an attempt to recapture the peace and beauty of the vistas which had so inspired Rachmaninov. After leaving Russia, he was financially obliged to concentrate on performing. He became celebrated as one of the greatest pianists of the 20th century; but he composed only five more pieces of music.

"His emotional world was shut off somehow for a long time," says Ashkenazy. "He had to get used to different circumstances. He was a very nostalgic person; he missed Russia. The estate where he composed is wonderful, with such space, endless steppes and valleys and fields and his music is very often like those endless fields. He left when he was nearly 45. I left Russia when I was 26, which is not so bad - you can start a new life - but at 45 it is more difficult. So he suffered. But he still created a few fantastic pieces, including the Third Symphony, Symphonic Dances and the Rhapsody On A Theme Of Paganini - this was a huge mental and emotional achievement."

Tony Palmer found himself catapulted into Rachmaninov's world by the enthusiasm and persuasive force of the Russian conductor Valery Gergiev, artistic director of the Kirov. It was the beginning of a voyage of discovery, Palmer says, in which he encountered a wealth of fabulous music that he had hardly known. He also came across an exceptional 18-year-old pianist named Valentina Igoshina, winner of the Rachmaninov Competition, who he immediately engaged to film some of Rachmaninov's piano works.

Gergiev conducts performances of the orchestral music especially for the film. And Rachmaninov's grandson, Alexander Rachmaninov, is a central presence: the camera crew went with him as he visited Ivanovka for the first time, to be welcomed en masse by a local committee and full choir.

Rachmaninov's musical philosophy shines very clearly through Palmer's documentary. "A composer's music should express the country of his birth, his religion, his love affairs... It should be the sum total of his experience," said Rachmaninov. He declared that he aimed to communicate directly with his listener's emotions, bypassing the intellect in favour of the heart. This approach accounts for his tremendous appeal, but also, perhaps, for the disdain of critics. Palmer points out, however, that he has never met a musician who does not take Rachmaninov tremendously seriously. The clues are in the masterly crafting of the music itself.

"The Second Symphony takes your breath away. Gergiev's got his finger absolutely on it when he says that it's like going through endless doors; with every door that opens, another huge vista opens up. The melodic line in the second movement goes on for 15 minutes - a single melodic line! You cannot make a single melodic line go on for 15 minutes without an incredible architecture to support it; it just wouldn't work."

Asked about Rachmaninov's essentially Russian qualities, Ashkenazy points to some recurring elements he believes are largely of the Russian character. "Rachmaninov was a very generous person but also a fatalist, and these two things you find in his music: the Dies Irae theme, which he frequently uses, represents fatalism; and the generosity is there all the time, such as in the way the harmonies rise up from the bass and help the music to glow and expand. His one-act opera Francesca Da Rimini shows exactly these two things: this fantastic generosity in the love scene and fatalism in the scenes of hell, which really are frightening. It's a tremendous voyage to another world. The plot is eternal again; it is virtue against vice, salvation or not. There's a wonderfully sweeping love scene, absolutely amazing, but when hell breaks loose this too is completely convincing." This opera will receive its first UK performance for more than a decade during the festival.

Besides fatalism, Rachmaninov has a reputation for downright gloominess - but this comes not so much from his music as from his impassive stage presence. Sir John Gielgud, who reads Rachmaninov's letters and reminiscences in Palmer's film, told Palmer that as a young boy in 1912, he saw Rachmaninov play at the Royal Albert Hall. He said that Rachmaninov was very stern, gave a very peremptory bow and when the applause burst out he looked at the organ rather than the audience.

This was typical of Rachmaninov on stage, but away from the concert platform his personality was completely different, as Ashkenazy explains. "He was shy rather than gloomy. He had a lovely, shy smile; it shows there is a lot of inner world." In Palmer's film, extracts of home movies, given to Palmer by Alexander Rachmaninov, capture the composer playing tennis and boating with his family; and Rachmaninov's niece talks about her uncle's warm sociability.

Even more significant is the dismissal by Alexander Rachmaninov and Palmer of one of the most famous episodes in Rachmaninov's life. The legend goes that after the disastrous premiere of his first symphony in 1897, he fell into a deep depression in which he could not compose. A course of hypnotherapy from one Dr Dahl eventually cured him and he dedicated his most celebrated work, the Second Piano Concerto, to the doctor. In conversation with Palmer about this, the word "bunkum" emerges.

"I have to tell you that Alexander disbelieves that entire story," says Palmer. "Yes, he did go to see Dr Dahl and the Second Piano Concerto is dedicated to him. But actually

he was in love with Dr Dahl's daughter. And he didn't stop composing after the fiasco with the First Symphony - there's quite a lot of music between the First Symphony and the Second Piano Concerto. No major work, but plenty of songs and piano pieces.

"The fact is that he went to Ivanovka and there I think Alexander has got the story instinctively right. After his terrible early experiences with his family and studies and the symphony, suddenly he's down in the countryside with his cousins. Ivanovka represented for him, at last, a real home life.

"Next, what do you do for entertainment in the Russian countryside? There wasn't exactly a theatre or cinema; they would have gone to the local fair. We found two fairs very close to Ivanovka and went to film them - and it's a real knees-up. I realised that that was part of his rehabilitation too.

"This is why, in the film, I juxtapose the scenes of the fair with the opening of the Second Piano Concerto. This piece is the immediate consequence of that period of rehabilitation. The performance that Gergiev conducts is much faster than it is often played - but it is exactly the same tempo at which Rachmaninov recorded it himself."

He wasn't at all a six-and-a-half-foot scowl; he was a fun chap. And the Second Piano Concerto is good-time music.

? Rediscovering The Music Of Rachmaninov, featuring Vladimir Ashkenazy, runs on the South Bank from May 6-23. For a brochure, call 0171 921 0971. Tony Palmer's documentary on Rachmaninov premieres at the festival on May 9.