

Classical music reviews, news & interviews

Daniil Trifonov, Royal Festival Hall

Plenty to treasure in the prizewinning young Russian pianist's colossal programme

by Jessica Duchen, Wednesday 1st October 2014

Daniil Trifonov, 23, has shot to prominence as one of the hottest pianistic properties of the moment. With multiple competition wins behind him, including the Tchaikovsky in his native Russia, plus a recording contract with DG and a frenetic globe-trotting schedule, he is now a very busy young man. Last night's London appearance was his recital debut at the Royal Festival Hall, a venue only accorded to the biggest names in the Southbank Centre's International Piano Series, the new season of which he was opening.

A sizable though not quite capacity crowd of pianophiles largely took this young wizard to their hearts, quick to offer him bouquets (in time-honoured Russian tradition) and a standing ovation. He deserved that for sheer respect: at times, to experience his full sequence of Liszt's *Études d'exécution transcendante* did resemble watching an expert climber tackling the north face of the Eiger. You know he's going to make it; there are instants spectacular and unexpected enough to be breathtaking; yet at other times you might wonder why anyone would put themselves through an ordeal of this magnitude.

The programme underwent a last-minute change, apparently that very afternoon: Beethoven's Sonata Op.111 was out, replaced with Rachmaninov's *Variations on a Theme of Chopin*. Trifonov has been playing the Rachmaninov in concerts all summer, while the Beethoven would have been a relatively new addition. One had the impression that nobody minded too much. Deity willing, Trifonov will have plenty of time ahead in which to schedule late Beethoven, but Rachmaninov suits him to perfection at the moment. Besides, an announcement explained that he felt the Variations went

better with his opening work, the Liszt arrangement of Bach's Fantasy and Fugue in G minor, BWV542. He played both works without a break.

From the start the hallmarks that can make you fall wholesale for Trifonov's artistry were more than apparent: his ability to evoke a sense of improvisation was out in force, together with masterful control of a gripping musical narrative that remains immediate and inspired without ever losing its logic. The quietude of the fugue theme was exquisitely controlled, the tone close to conjuring an organ pipe far away in the stratospheres.

It is, though, a densely written piece that can risk clangorousness and here emerged a recurrent problem: the somewhat bitter cocktail of the RFH's acoustic – clinically clear, yet lacking in bloom or warmth – mingled with Trifonov's preferred Fazioli piano. This is an instrument on which he can certainly produce superbly nuanced pianissimos, but it seems to lack a truly satisfying resonance, especially in its central register. He appeared to be compensating for this with generous washes of sustaining pedal, but that sometimes created problems of its own.

The Rachmaninov variations, taking as their theme Chopin's funereal Prelude in C sharp minor from Op.28, nevertheless contained magic aplenty; at home in a work he clearly knows backwards, Trifonov allowed his sonic imagination to evoke a wealth of marvels. Especially noteworthy was his remarkable depth of perspective in, for instance, Variation 13 – a quasi-choral cantilena offset by distant glimmers that could have come from another galaxy. Throughout the rapid variations, too, he layered the dazzling twists and turns of Rachmaninov's contrapuntal writing into a remarkable luminescent tapestry. The final build-up and explosion into a grand polonaise, which ultimately vapourises to leave behind the theme at its bleakest, had a grandeur and fantastical, demoniac tinge that would not disgrace the scene of the Walpurgis Night Ball in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. Again one could not help longing for a more intimate and resonant acoustic in which to appreciate the wealth of intricate detail.

Performing Liszt's 12 Études live in concert is not a task that many pianists would dare set themselves. These pieces are not just a pianistic 12 Labours of Hercules in terms of technique; each one is an epic poem in its own right, presenting a wealth of grand gesture filled with enormous intensity and high-octane rhetoric – frequently laced with veritable jungles of chromatic harmonies. They are not to everyone's taste, and hearing the whole lot together – at approx. 64 mins – can leave you feeling a wee bit battered. But for those who love them, such a rare occasion is to be treasured; and Trifonov's ascent of these craggy rockfaces featured moments of magic that will linger in the memory for a very long time.

At other moments even this virtuoso's virtuoso nearly came a cropper: the fearsome *Mazeppa* almost proved its reputation as a piece that simply cannot be performed live. It wasn't that Trifonov had bitten off more than he could chew – he could dunk Liszt in his tea any time he likes. It is more that perhaps

he could chew for a little longer. I would love to hear him do this cycle again after he has lived with it for a few more years.

The finest of the set nevertheless contained some of the most astonishing piano playing one could hope to hear anywhere in the world. These were the Études that are lyrical in aspect or require the lightest possible fingerwork: Trifonov proved the worth of an approach that, rather than projecting outwards at every turn, instead pulls the audience's attention forward into active listening. Less was definitely more. *Feux Follets* in particular shone out as an interpretation that transcended the ferocious technique it needs, capturing the other-worldly poetry of the "Will-o-the-Wisps" idea as well as its iridescent delicacy. *Paysage* and *Ricordanza* were both as soft and silky as fine fur.

The set concluded with a pair of pieces in which our young star exceeded even his own high standards, although by this point he was looking well and truly wrung out: in *Harmonies du Soir*, perhaps the most sensually beautiful of the Études, he weighted each harmony in the initial build-up with a different significance and colour, later declaiming the melodic lines with the quiet magnetism and authority of a true performance poet. Finally *Chasse-neige* was paced and voiced so convincingly that one almost felt swallowed alive by the blizzard as it approached and struck.

To top everything, Trifonov offered an encore of Debussy's *Reflets dans l'eau* (from *Images* Book I) – perfectly balanced and as cool and refreshing as a dip in a mountain lake after an exceedingly hot sauna. We all needed that by then.

A rating of four stars seems a bit invidious for such an extraordinary, if patchy evening. Some of it deserved double that amount.

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Comments

Submitted by James Thomson (not verified) on Wed, 01/10/2014 - 16:12.
Excellent review, which put into words better than I could my take on the recital. I've known the Liszt Etudes for over 40 years; I had an LP of Lazar Berman playing them. Trifonov - magnificent as he undoubtedly is - did not quite display Berman's positively demonic power (Gilels called him "the phenomenon of the musical world"), but managed to hold me spellbound from start to finish, which very few pianists could do in this repertoire. He did that with his superb musicianship rather than sheer technique. And what a perfectly-chosen encore, your description of the effect of which couldn't be bettered. Afterwards, I shook hands with the young titan backstage, and what a delightful person he is. A great night in the RFH.