

A Rachmaninov Drama at Middle Temple Hall

A review by Claire Seymour

It is Rachmaninov's major works for orchestra - the Second and Third Piano Concertos, the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, the Symphonic Dances - alongside the *All-Night Vespers* and the music for solo piano, which have earned the composer a permanent place in the concert repertoire today.



But his songs - there are over eighty *románsy*, as they are known in Russian - are increasingly well-known among audiences, and this 'Rachmaninov Drama', curated by Julius Drake and performed by the pianist, baritone Roderick Williams and soprano Sofia Fomina at Middle Temple Hall showed why they deserve to be heard and admired, confirming as they do Rachmaninov's skill as a Romantic melodist, as a crafter of emotional drama and as a virtuosic pianist.

The sequence of twenty-four songs was performed in alternation by the singers, often with the songs running *segue*, creating an on-going 'dialogue' and sustaining a dramatic fluency as we journeyed through tales of love unrequited, fulfilled and lost, of love's illusions and finally love's regrets. Though they are, in general, fairly brief and follow a similar method, the songs offer diversity of mood and meaning, and there were peaks of emotional tension, moments of lyric reflection and occasional folk-like whimsy.

Sofia Fomina immediately established an emotional sound world, opening the programme with 'The soldier's wife', a folk-style lament in which a woman regrets her marriage to an orphan who has been in the army for twenty-five years, leaving her without family and home, an outsider in her village. Fomina used her powerful lyric soprano, emotive vibrato and rich array of colour to create a mood of great pathos. In 'At My Window' the passions expressed were more ecstatic as her soprano rose confidently to the melodic peaks; 'A passing breeze' was more ruminative, as Fomina held back, painting an evocative picture of a dark ocean soon to be richly illumined by the regenerative sunrise.

The impassioned joy she conjured in 'Spring Torrents' - "Spring comes, spring comes!" - brought a warm smile to the face of Roderick Williams, seated to the side. In contrast, 'There is a small island' Op.14/2 - the text of which was credited in the programme as being by Konstantin Balmont, when in fact it is a translation by the Russian poet of a lyric poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley - was dreamy and wistful: as sort of musical *paysage* in which Fomina's initial light-voiced declamatory reflections on the luxuriant verdure of the island gave way to increasingly more defined melodic shapes, reaching down to the voice's lower register, conjuring the mystery and serenity of the sleeping, dreaming isle.

The early Op.8 set of songs concludes with a lengthy melodrama, 'Prayer' - Alexei Plescheyev's translation of a text by Goethe - in which Fomina found fervour and intensity, as she expressed the guilt

and torment of a woman who, having rebuffed a young man's innocent love, now regrets the coldness which has resulted in his death and begs God's forgiveness. The ending was magical, as the voice trailed up and away in a heaven-bound plea, "Hear my sinful prayer,/For I am wounded in my soul", which was answered by three quiet, ambiguous piano chords.

Sometimes translated as 'The Quest', 'A-oo' made for a striking opening to the second half of the recital, with its hyperbolic metaphors and titular phrase - the calling-cry you make when you've lost track of your beloved when you're wandering in the mountains. Fomina beautifully declared the lovers' passion to be like that of a flower that, at noon, "lights the candle of another flower". This song is one of the six Op.38 songs, in which the relative simplicity of the early songs has given way to a more complex medium, inspired by the symbolist poetry, and complemented by the tumultuous intricacies of the piano part with its extensive, extravagant postlude.

Fomina may have had an advantage over Roderick Williams, singing as she was in her mother tongue, but the baritone communicated with no less immediacy and honesty, his beautifully appealing voice speaking with unaffected sincerity and finely defined feeling. There was ardency and forthrightness in 'I was with her' Op.14/4, the final declaration of eternal unity with the beloved's soul rising with strength and dignity. 'Ah, never sing to me again' Op.4/4 closed in bittersweet quietude, the sombre mood underpinned by the piano's dark ostinato and low-lying counterpoint, as the poet-narrator spurned memories and melodies of "sorrowful Georgia" which recalled "Another life and a distant shore".

Perhaps we missed a little 'Russian colour' in the more folk-like songs, such as 'She is as fair as noon' Op.14/9, with its lilting ripple in the accompaniment and lamenting sentiments. But, this was more than compensated for by Williams skilful control of line and structure. 'How fair this place is' Op.21/7, which Williams sang seated, rose beautifully at the close, as the poet-narrator lost himself in immersive reflections on "God - and I, Flowers, and an ageing pine./And you, my dream!", the pianissimo *fermata* seeming to balance on the cusp of a reality which might dissolve into dream.

The extended monologue 'Fate' Op.21/2 was a wonderfully compelling drama of great rhetorical impact, in which the eponymous figure of destiny stalked the protagonist "with her walking crutch and sombre eyes", constantly niggling him, "Tap, tap, tap". Aleksei Apukhtin subtitled his poem 'On Beethoven's Fifth Symphony', intimating that the opening notes of the symphony signify Fate knocking at Beethoven's door; whatever the truth or otherwise of that belief, Williams' performance was 'symphonic' in stature and gripping in its theatrical and vocal immediacy.

The recital closed with Rachmaninov's only song for two voices, though 'Two Voices' is less a 'duet' and more a 'duologue' as soprano and baritone sing separately, exchanging their short declamatory phrases back and forth. The man opens the song, enquiring of a young girl about the two men who had courted her, now that she has lost them both. Her replies tell of her emotional innocence, growth and ultimate regret, and though at times light-hearted the song had a conclusive sadness and sombreness: "Who shall you remember in your heart, my lovely one?" asked Williams; "I feel pity for the first, but I shall love the latter!" replied Fomina, her voice retreating quietly as she herself left the platform. She was to return, though, for a postscript: the 'Letter to K.S. Stanislavsky from S. Rachmaninov', one of twelve songs which were remained unpublished by Rachmaninov.

Throughout the recital, Julius Drake's accompaniments were sure, sensitive and skilfully shaped. Whether sparse or complex, the piano's contributions were eloquent but supportive, never distracting from and always complementing the voices. Small 'echoes' of the vocal lines made their mark, unobtrusively but pointedly; moods were etched evocatively - the wistful chains of chords at the close of 'There is a small island' and the tender piano postlude in 'The sounds are many' Op.26/1 were particularly moving. Rachmaninov began his creative life as a composer of song, prompted by his love of poetry - that by his contemporaries Balmont, Severianin, and Brussof who exercised a strong intellectual and creative influence during the late nineteenth-century, as well as the work of earlier poets such as Pushkin,

Lermontov, Merejkovsky, A. Tolstoy and Zhukovsky. He published his first songs in 1873; his last, the Six Songs Op.38 appeared in 1916, though these were followed by two 'sacred songs', the pencil sketches of which he gave to Nina Koshetz and which were subsequently presented to the Library of Congress in 1970 and published three years later.

The fall of the Romanov dynasty in February 1917 disrupted Russian concert life and forced Rachmaninov to look for employment outside his native land. A concert tour of the Scandinavian countries was followed by several invitations to travel to the US - including one to become conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, which he turned down - and in November 1918 he sailed from Oslo to New York. Thus began a new life as a concert pianist, performing up to seventy concerts a year in major cities such as Boston and New York, but also in smaller towns such as Davenport, Asheville, Syracuse - just about anywhere (as Richard D. Sylvester tells us in his 2014 *Companion* to the complete songs) where there was a suitable venue where Steinway could deliver and tune a piano.

From this time, after twenty-six years as a composer of rom ánsy, there were to be no more songs from Rachmaninov's pen. Perhaps he felt that his songs, which so powerfully expressed the spirit of his homeland, needed a Russian audience. If so, he was mistaken. Though the Russian texts may place the songs at one remove, a committed and consummate performance can make their emotions and life-spirit immediate, real and compelling, as the audience members at Middle Temple Hall discovered, to their great pleasure.

Claire Seymour

Sofia Fomina (soprano), Roderick Williams (baritone), Julius Drake (piano) 'The soldier's wife', 'I was with her', 'At my window', 'Ah, never sing to me again', 'A ring', 'She is as fair as noon', 'A passing breeze', 'How fair this place is!', 'Spring torrents', 'Oh no, I beg you, forsake me not', 'Night is sorrowful', 'In the silence of the night', 'Dissonance', 'A-oo!', 'Fate', 'There is a small island', 'The sounds are many', 'Lilacs', 'Song of the disenchanting', 'A prayer', 'You knew him', 'When yesterday we met', 'Fragment from A. Musset', 'Two partings', 'P.S.: Letter to K.S. Stanislavsky from S. Rachmaninov'

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