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A Rachmaninov Drama - Scenes from a Love Affair



Rachmaninov songs; Sofia Fomina, Roderick Williams, Julius Drake; Temple Music at Middle Temple Hall Reviewed by Robert Hugill on 5 July 2019 Star rating: 4.0 (****) Around a quarter of Rachmaninov's mature songs presented as a striking dramatic sequence, highlighting discoveries old and new

For the last Temple Song concert of the season, Temple Music presented *A Rachmaninov Drama - Scenes from a Love Affair*, a programme of Rachmaninov songs performed by Sofia Fomina (soprano), Roderick Williams (baritone) and Julius Drake (piano). Drake had selected a sequence of some two dozen of Rachmaninov's songs on the theme of love, unattainable, attained, and lost, ending with Rachmaninov's sole duet (actually more of a dialogue).

Rachmaninov wrote songs throughout his career in Russia, excluding juvenilia he wrote some 83 songs between 1890 (when he was 17) to 1916, but after 1917 when he left Russia as an exile after the Revolution he stopped writing songs. His disconnection from his home country, and the fact that the Russia of his youth now no longer existed, had a large effect on Rachmaninov's compositions. Settled in the USA, his main source of income came from piano and conducting engagements with demanding tour schedules, leading to a reduction in his time for composition; between 1918 and 1943, he completed just six works, including *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, *Symphony No. 3*, and *Symphonic Dances*. One of the ironies of Rachmaninov's songs (and his smaller piano pieces) is that their prevailing mood of yearning, lyric melancholy seems to evoke the exiled Rachmaninov yet they were actually written by the younger composer settled in Russia.

It is not that the songs offer no stylistic development, and the six songs Opus 38, written in 1916 just before Rachmaninov left Russia, set Symbolist poets rather than the Russian Romantics that Rachmaninov had previously favoured, and in style we can hear how Rachmaninov moved away from the Tchaikovsky-inspired melody of the earliest songs. Song for Rachmaninov seems to have been intimately bound up with the personal, his songs were dedicated to friends and relatives, wives and mistresses, and also to the great singers who performed them, perhaps offering a hint as to why he stopped writing songs when these relationships were severed by his exile.

Sofia Fomina and Roderick Williams sang the songs alternim, creating a discreet sense of drama and interaction. Both sang from memory and there was no applause between items, and both were highly communicative bringing out the drama of the songs. Both singers, in different ways, highlighted the innate lyric melancholy of Rachmaninov's music and there were few songs which were entirely happy. If the songs are a personal reflection of Rachmaninov's character then he was definitely a glass half empty bloke. For all the songs approachability, there is intense emotion here and hearing such a significant number of songs together we heard the way Rachmaninov often combined the lyric melody with a significant freedom in his setting of the Russian texts, giving rise sometimes to a creative dissonance as Rachmaninov never quite lets us settle into a gentle, melodic melancholy.

Sofia Fomina has a wonderfully flexible yet vibrant lyric voice and often made Rachmaninov's vocal lines richly seductive, so that a song like *At my window* was delicate yet vibrant whilst in *A passing breeze* she brought an element of mystery to an apparently straight forward narrative. *Spring Torrents*, one of his best known songs, was highly engaging yet rising to real passion and joy. Fomina finished the first half with *Dissonance*, a terrific drama which was dark and intense, almost operatic, with the piano part reflecting Rachmaninov's own challenging pianism and some expressively complex harmonies. *A-oo* from the Opus 38 songs was almost expressionist at times and slightly curious, giving us hints of potential directions that Rachmaninov might have taken. *Lilacs*, another well known song, was quietly delicate and evocative. Fomina ended her contributions with the deeply felt Goethe setting, *A prayer*, and the slightly disturbing *Fragment from A. Musset* setting a Alfred de Musset in translation.

There was a wonderful frankness to Roderick Williams, if we sometimes seemed to be eavesdropping of Sofia Fomina's intense, personal emotion, Williams was addressing us directly often reliving strong emotions in recollection rather than living through them. Songs like *I was with her* had a great sense of strength, whereas the final verse of *Ah, never sing to me again* had a seductive lightness to it, and Williams brought out the slow seductive melody of *She is as fair as noon*. The beauty of Williams tone in songs like *How fair this place* is was always matched by a strong sense of the words. Some songs, like *Ah no, I beg you, forsake me not* were almost operatic and the long and remarkable *Fate* was a real dramatic tour de force, an intense scene punctuated by the striking Russian version of 'tap, tap, tap'. *Song of the disenchanted* was another dark, complex piece, with a lovely freedom in the vocal line. *Yesterday we met* was quietly controlled, very much strong emotion recalled in tranquillity.

The duet *Two partings* is slightly strange, one voice interrogating another about her love affairs, a real operatic scene. The concert ended with a delightful post-script a song letter which Rachmaninov wrote to the great theatre director Stanislavsky, *Letter to K.S. Stanislavsky from S. Rachmaninov*. The beauty of this sequence of songs was the way that it gave us familiar songs in a rather new light, but also introduced us to unfamiliar gems. Throughout Julius Drake accompanied with great sympathy and flexibility, always taking the complex piano writing in his stride and making it part of the song rather than an end in itself.