

LSO St Luke's

CHAMBER MUSIC



Recorded for future broadcast on BBC Radio 3

RACHMANINOFF & FRIENDS: BORIS GILTBURG

Friday 11 February 2022 6pm
Jerwood Hall, LSO St Luke's

Sergei Prokofiev Piano Sonata No 2 in D minor
Serge Rachmaninoff Piano Sonata No 1 in D minor

Boris Giltburg piano

Piano Sonata No 2 in D minor

Sergei Prokofiev

- 1 Allegro, ma non troppo
- 2 Scherzo. Allegro marcato
- 3 Andante
- 4 Vivace

This Sonata dates from the winter of 1913–14, when Sergei Prokofiev was in his final year at the St Petersburg Conservatory. His association with that institution had begun in 1904, when he was 13, and continued on and off into his twenties, by which time he had an impressive list of compositions to his credit, including two piano concertos.

The second of these, like the Second and Fourth Piano Sonatas, was dedicated to a close friend and fellow piano student, Maximilian Schmidthof, who died by suicide in April 1913 leaving a note for Prokofiev which read: 'Here's the latest news – I have shot myself. Don't be too upset'. Prokofiev assumed the note to be a joke, until his friend's body was discovered days later in a forest close to the border. On 9 May Prokofiev viewed the body. Undoubtedly traumatised, Prokofiev went home and dedicated his new concerto to Schmidthof's memory, followed some months later by the Second Piano Sonata, which he himself premiered in Moscow on 5 February 1914.

Prokofiev said his idiosyncratic style incorporated such diverse elements as Beethovenian Classicism, modernistic harmonies, toccata-like motor rhythms, lyricism and a taste for the parodic and grotesque. Most of these are evident in the Second Sonata, which ranges from Romantic lyricism to mocking parody. It is a concise, powerful piece in four movements, the first of which encompasses both the lyrical and the carnivalesque. The second is a bizarre Scherzo. After a brief, tinkly trio section the theme returns in the bass clef (at a deeper pitch). The third movement slips down a semitone into the dark key of G-sharp minor, for a dirge-like lament of anguished tenderness, at one point marked 'con tristezza' (with sorrow), but also rising to a peak of fierce anger. The mercurial finale showcases Prokofiev's own virtuosity, while mirroring many of the fluctuating moods of the previous movements.



Piano Sonata No 1 in D minor

Serge Rachmaninoff

1 **Allegro moderato**

2 **Lento**

3 **Allegro molto**

Serge Rachmaninoff's First Piano Sonata was one of three pieces composed in Dresden, where the composer, his wife and their young daughter moved in November 1906. They had moved to escape the hectic treadmill of life in Moscow, where Rachmaninoff had been conductor at the Bolshoi Theatre, and the political turmoil caused by the 1905 October Revolution. They stayed in Dresden for almost three years, living a quiet life. Rachmaninoff wrote that they lived 'like hermits: we see nobody, we know nobody, and we go nowhere', but added that he worked a great deal. The Dresden years yielded his Second Symphony – designed to lay to rest the spectre of his First, whose disastrous premiere in 1897 had thrown him into a deep depression – together with an unfinished opera (*Monna Vanna*), and the First Piano Sonata. The original inspiration for this last piece came from Goethe's *Faust*, and particularly Liszt's *Faust Symphony*, which focuses on the three main characters in the drama: Faust, Gretchen and Mephistopheles.

Rachmaninoff initially visualised a similar 'programme' piece, but he quickly abandoned that idea in favour of an abstract sonata in traditional three-movement format, two fast movements enclosing a slow central one. Its composition caused him considerable angst, so he sought the help of a former classmate at the Moscow Conservatory, as well as consulting other friends and colleagues including the composer Nikolai Medtner and the pianist Konstantin Igumnov. They suggested cuts, and eventually Rachmaninoff lopped some ten minutes off the Sonata's original length. The heavily revised result was finally premiered by Igumnov in Moscow on 17 October 1908 but met with a mixed critical reception. It has remained less often performed than the Second Sonata of 1913.

Faust's restless, questing spirit animates the Sonata's extensive opening *Allegro moderato*, dominated by a motif from the introduction consisting of a subdued, interrogative open fifth followed by a loud, confident cadence. This motif, as well as other thematic material from the first movement, recurs in the succeeding movements: a densely argued *Lento* in F major, and a tumultuous, virtuosic finale.

Boris Giltburg

piano

The Moscow-born, Israeli pianist is lauded across the globe as a deeply sensitive, insightful and compelling interpreter. At home in a broad range of repertoire, in recent years he has been increasingly recognised as a leading interpreter of Rachmaninoff: 'His originality stems from a convergence of heart and mind, served by immaculate technique and motivated by a deep and abiding love for one of the 20th century's greatest composer pianists.' (*Gramophone*).

To celebrate the Beethoven anniversary in 2020, Giltburg embarked upon a unique project to record and film all 32 of Beethoven's piano sonatas across the year, blogging about the process as it unfolded. The cycle, released on Naxos on all the major digital platforms – and subsequently as a box set – combines the high production values of a studio recording with the immediacy of a live performance, resulting in a uniquely fresh and personal take on these pillars of repertoire. Giltburg's intense focus on Beethoven extended to the stage platform, as he performed the last four sonatas throughout the 2020/21 season. He is recording the complete Beethoven piano concertos with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and Vasily Petrenko, performed them as a cycle on three consecutive nights with the Brussels Philharmonic at the 2020 Flagey Piano Festival, and appeared in the BBC TV series 'Being Beethoven'.

He regularly plays recitals in the world's most prestigious halls, notably the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Carnegie Hall, Hamburg Elbphilharmonie, London Southbank Centre, Prague Rudolfinum, Auditorium Radio France, Teatro Colon, Shanghai Oriental Arts Centre, Tokyo Toppan Hall and Wiener Konzerthaus. From 2021 to 2023 he plays the complete solo works of Ravel at Wigmore Hall and in Brussels at BOZAR and Flagey, also performing part of the cycle at the Amsterdam Muziekgebouw. In Autumn 2021 he curated the chamber music series of the Dvořák Prague Festival.

Collaborations with major conductors and orchestras worldwide include the Philharmonia Orchestra, London Philharmonic, Czech Philharmonic, Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie, WDR, Rotterdam Philharmonic, Oslo Philharmonic, Israel Philharmonic, NHK Symphony, Baltimore and Seattle symphonies and at the BBC Proms. In 2021/22 he debuts with Santa Cecilia di Roma with Kirill Petrenko, and Orchestre National de France with Cristian Macelaru, also returning to the Royal Philharmonic with Vasily Petrenko, Halle Orchestra with Sir Mark Elder and Netherlands Philharmonic with Mark Wigglesworth.

Giltburg is a consummate recording artist. In 2015 he began a fruitful collaboration with Naxos Records, releasing a series of critically praised recordings of works by Beethoven, Schumann, Liszt, Rachmaninoff and Shostakovich. His earlier album of Prokofiev's War Sonatas was nominated for a Classical BRIT Critics' Award, and more recently he has won an Opus Klassik for Best Soloist Recording (Rachmaninoff concertos and *Études Tableaux*); a Diapason d'Or (Shostakovich concertos and his own arrangement of Shostakovich's Eighth String Quartet), and a *Gramophone* Award for the Dvořák Piano Quintet on Supraphon with the Pavel Haas Quartet, with whom he has a long-standing collaboration.