



Rachmaninoff

24 preludes for piano

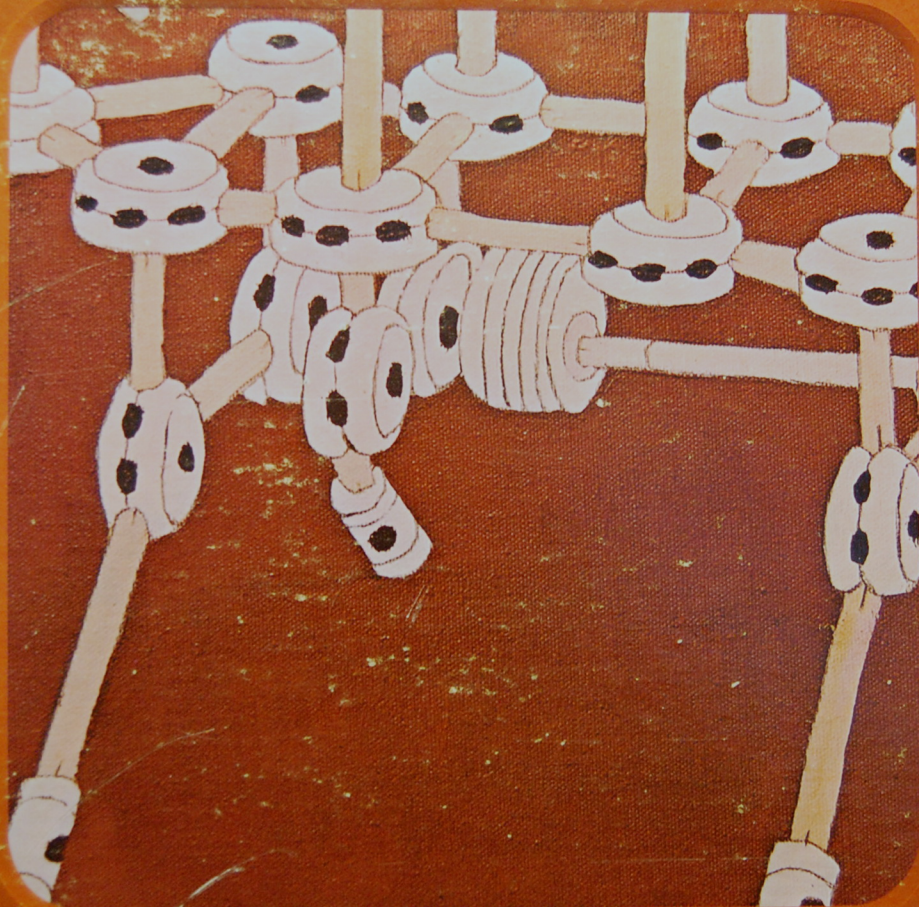
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CONSTANCE KEENE

"I cannot imagine anybody, including Rachmaninoff himself, playing the Preludes more beautifully. I was completely flabbergasted by the fantastic sweep, color, tone, and, last but not least, the incredible technique."

ARTUR RUBINSTEIN





PHILIPS

THE 24 PRELUDES FOR PIANO

Side 1:		
PRELUDE IN C SHARP MINOR, OP. 3 NO. 2	3:35	
PRELUDES, OP. 23:		
NO. 1 IN F SHARP MINOR	3:17	
NO. 2 IN B FLAT MAJOR	3:07	
NO. 3 IN D MINOR	3:08	
NO. 4 IN D MAJOR	3:53	
Side 2:		
NO. 5 IN G MINOR	3:40	
NO. 6 IN E FLAT MAJOR	2:50	
NO. 7 IN C MINOR	2:20	
NO. 8 IN A FLAT MAJOR	3:27	
NO. 9 IN E FLAT MINOR	1:49	
NO. 10 IN G FLAT MAJOR	3:21	
Side 3:		
PRELUDES, OP. 23:		
NO. 1 IN C MAJOR	1:15	
NO. 2 IN B FLAT MINOR	3:01	
NO. 3 IN E MAJOR	2:19	
NO. 4 IN E MINOR	4:33	
NO. 5 IN G MAJOR	2:34	
NO. 6 IN F MINOR	1:21	
NO. 7 IN F MAJOR	2:29	
Side 4:		
NO. 8 IN A MINOR	1:41	
NO. 9 IN G MAJOR	2:52	
NO. 10 IN B MINOR	5:00	
NO. 11 IN B MAJOR	2:16	
NO. 12 IN G SHARP MINOR	2:09	
NO. 13 IN D FLAT MAJOR	4:27	

CONSTANCE KEENE, PIANO

"Rachmaninoff's very first prelude, composed in his nineteenth year, was to become so intimately associated with Rachmaninoff's person that the composer was sometimes called Mr. C sharp Minor," writes Victor Seroff in his colorful biography of the Russian composer-pianist.

Innumerable legends have surrounded this ubiquitous piece, including the one that Rachmaninoff hated it because he had sold it outright for a pittance. Actually, Rachmaninoff did not hate the work. He merely resented the fact that the world had neglected his other works—far superior works—in favor of the C sharp minor Prelude. From the biography of Rachmaninoff by Bertensson and Leyda we learn that he was also angered by the inexorable demands of the concert-going public that he play "IT" every time he approached a piano. His European manager corroborated this and added: "But he faced the inevitable years ago. At Saturday's concert in London, he said to me, 'Don't worry, I know my duty. I shall play it.'"

We also read that as late as 1929, when Rachmaninoff was asked by a friend whether he would conduct several orchestral concerts in New York which would include his concertos and symphonic works, the composer was not excited at the prospect. His reply was: "The public does not care for anything of mine except the C sharp minor Prelude and, in fact, does not believe that I can compose anything else." This was hardly justified, but at the time Rachmaninoff was still brooding over the devastating critical reaction to the 1937 premiere of his Fourth Piano Concerto.

Rachmaninoff's compositional career was a perpetual battle between his audiences and his critics. Nevertheless, he established himself as one of the most successful musicians in history, as a conductor, a composer, and a sovereign pianist. But as Seroff writes: "Though the critics had reached the zenith of their praise of Rachmaninoff as a conductor and pianist who had no peer, they tore him to shreds for his later compositions . . . spoke of him as 'outdated' and a 'living corpse' . . . and reproached him for the 'salon' in his music."

The critical denigration of Rachmaninoff as a composer is also discussed by Abram Chasins in his book *Speak-*

ing of Pianists: "When Rachmaninoff's critics accuse him of not expressing the world in the way of his contemporaries, they are right. Rachmaninoff was no iconoclast. His world was his own, like that of every true artist: his work was an expression of himself and that self was a product of his times on his terms. Rachmaninoff's music has spoken and continues to speak to an enormous audience. Little information is to be gained from ignoring or disdaining that fact. Rachmaninoff's work is a telling part of musical evolution. The composer was always popular but never *à la mode*. No better indication exists that he will not grow outmoded."

This evaluation is demonstrable throughout the twenty-four Preludes contained in this album—in their spaciousness and coherence, in the striking individuality of their thematic ideas, in the luxuriance of their development. Their composition spans a period of nearly two decades: the C sharp minor Prelude is the second of a set of five pieces completed in 1892 and dedicated to Arensky; the Ten Preludes, Op. 23, dedicated to Siloti, date from 1903-4; and the Opus 32 set was completed in 1910.

No two Preludes are identical, despite structural resemblances. There are few pages within these remarkable works in which Rachmaninoff does not show himself the creator of inspired material sizable in dimension and difficulty. In the varied emotional content of the pieces one finds powerful dramatic contrasts, sometimes within the same work, as in the B flat major Prelude, Op. 10 No. 2, with its blend of nobility, lyricism, and heroism. Like Rachmaninoff's magnificent *Etudes-Tableaux* of 1916-17, his twenty-four Preludes are still not widely enough savored or appreciated. They contain many strokes of genius, elegant and eloquent pages created by a consummate master of the piano idiom.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Apart from the books already cited, John Culshaw's excellent study, *Sergei Rachmaninoff*, published in the *Contemporary Composers* series, is warmly recommended to those who wish to study the composer more deeply.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARY MORRIS

THE ARTIST

Every professional has the ambition of winning the admiration of his peers.

Constance Keene has won such recognition to a remarkable degree and from some of the sovereign figures of the musical world. When the Hallé Orchestra celebrated its centenary in 1958, Constance Keene was the one American soloist chosen by Sir John Barbirolli during that memorable season.

In 1953 Miss Keene appeared with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in a broadcast of the Saint-Saëns G minor Concerto. By fortunate chance, Josef Hofmann, whom Rachmaninoff used to call "The King of Kings among pianists," was listening in his Los Angeles home. A few days later, the Artist's Representative at the Steinway Piano Company received a letter from Hofmann asking, "Who is this amazing pianist?"

Hofmann later related his delight in discovering that the pianist of whom he inquired was, so to speak, his "grandpupil," for Constance Keene was the protégé of Hofmann's protégé, Abram Chasins. (She is also, in private life, Mrs. Abram Chasins.) Subsequently, Hofmann sent the following letter to Miss Keene:

Los Angeles, California
December 24th, 1953

My Dear Constance Keene,

I was glad to know positively it was you who played so superbly last July, in Chicago. Now a bit of Xmas cheer, and my very best wishes to you and Abram for a very happy new year.

Josef Hofmann

Most recently, among the first to receive this album was Artur Rubinstein, whose immediate reaction is published here: "I cannot imagine anybody, including Rachmaninoff himself, playing the Preludes more beautifully. I was completely flabbergasted by the fantastic sweep, color, tone, and, last but not least, the incredible technique."

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