SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Boris Giltburg Plays Rachmaninov's Preludes

Sunday 28 September 2025, 7.30pm
Queen Elizabeth Hall

We are proud to be a place where people come together to discover and connect with the wonder of classical music. Throughout the year, we provide unrivalled opportunities to encounter, live in person, the full range of music, and a variety of different ways for you to experience it.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Rachmaninov Prelude in C sharp minor, Op.3 No.2	4'
Rachmaninov 10 Preludes, Op.23	34'
Interval	
Rachmaninov 13 Preludes, Op.32	38'

Performers
Boris Giltburg *piano*

This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes, including a 20-minute interval.

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873–1943)
Prelude in C sharp minor, Op.3 No.2

In everyday language, calling something a 'prelude' implies some kind of introduction or prologue. The same was true for the earliest musical preludes – short organ pieces that would welcome a congregation to mass, for example, or brief lute or keyboard works to warm up the fingers and whet the musical appetite. Later musical preludes acted as freer-form prologues to meatier, more complex pieces – just think of the 48 keyboard Preludes and Fugues written by JS Bach, dubbed *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, which cycled – twice, across two books – through all the possible major and minor keys. Fryderyk Chopin virtually established the piano Prelude as a short character piece in his set of 24, Op.28, which stuck with Bach's all-major-and-minor-keys format, and many later composers – from Alkan to Scriabin to Shostakovich – took that plan and ran with it.

Sergei Rachmaninov was another of those composers. It's unlikely, however, that he had in mind his eventual output of 24 Preludes – again covering each of the major and minor keys – in 1892, when he created his inaugural piece in the form, the famous (perhaps notorious) C sharp minor Prelude that opens tonight's survey. After all, the grand project would take him 18 years and two additional sets of pieces, as we'll hear later.

He was 19 at the time, and a recent graduate from the Moscow Conservatoire, where he had earned the prestigious Gold Medal in piano performance and composition. If his next step was to establish an international reputation, ideally as both a pianist and a composer, then this single Prelude would set him firmly on that path. Rachmaninov himself gave the Prelude its premiere, on 26 September 1892 at the Moscow Electrical Exhibition, to an enthusiastic reception. But its worldwide fame came courtesy of Rachmaninov's cousin Alexander Siloti, globally renowned as a piano virtuoso, who included the piece in concerts across Western Europe and the USA in 1898, where its tolling bell-like sounds and tempestuous emotions quickly captured the popular imagination. So much so, in fact, that British and American publishers swiftly issued editions with invented titles including *The Burning of Moscow*, *The Day of Judgement* and *The Bells of Moscow* (that last nickname has to some extent stuck). Paid a mere 40 roubles as a one-off fee for the piece – with, naturally, no thoughts as to international rights – Rachmaninov came to harbour more than a little resentment towards the music that had made his international name, but brought him little financial benefit. 'Many, many times I wish I had never written it,' he later admitted.

Nonetheless, the Prelude in C sharp minor is an astonishingly effective, unforgettable creation. Its thunderous opening – three fateful bass notes, surely designed to harness the sonic power of the late 19th-century piano – moves into a far gentler, more contemplative 'bell' theme expressed in rich, chiming harmonies. A brief, more agitated central section is interrupted at its climax by – what else? – the return of the 'bell' theme, now forcefully loud and spread across the piano's entire range. Rachmaninov's inaugural Prelude slips to a barely heard conclusion above an incessantly tolling great bell, deep in the piano's bass.

10 Preludes, Op.23

No.1 in F sharp minor (Largo)
No.2 in B flat (Maestoso)
No.3 in D minor (Tempo di minuetto)
No.4 in D (Andante cantabile)
No.5 in G minor (Alla marcia)
No.6 in E flat (Andante)
No.7 in C minor (Allegro)
No.8 in A flat (Allegro vivace)
No.9 in E flat (Presto)
No.10 in G flat (Largo)

It is hard to know whether Rachmaninov had decided upon an all-keys set of 24 Preludes when he came to write his Ten Preludes, Op.23, in 1901 and 1903. It's perhaps unlikely, given the pieces' somewhat arbitrary collection of keys – though, maybe significantly, Rachmaninov chose not to duplicate the C sharp minor tonality of the Prelude we've just heard.

It was a time of great hope and optimism for the composer, who not only married his beloved cousin Natalia Satina in May 1902, but had also overcome two years of writer's block precipitated by the disastrous and highly traumatic premiere of his First Symphony in 1897. His music – including the Second Piano Concerto, Second Suite for two pianos and Cello Sonata – was now flowing freely, and proving hugely popular too.

Rachmaninov dedicated the Op.23 Preludes to Alexander Siloti, who'd done so much to champion the composer's music (and was best man at Sergei and Natalia's wedding). The pieces themselves develop Rachmaninov's earlier ideas about the form: each Prelude here maps out its own emotional and thematic world, and each gently pushes specific aspects of keyboard technique (the pieces were, after all, conceived as much to showcase Rachmaninov's exceptional skills as a pianist as they were his pioneering abilities as a composer). After the haunting melody of No.1, effervescent No.2 pits a fanfare-like right hand against tumultuous left-hand arpeggios. No.3 is designated a minuet dance but feels more like a march, while No.4 is a slow, lyrical nocturne. No.5 really is a march – listen out for pounding drums and trumpet fanfares – while blissful, rapturous No.6 had an intimate meaning for the composer: 'It really just poured out of me all at once on the day my daughter was born,' he later wrote. After tense, anxious No.7 comes the relaxed lyricism of No.8, and rich, elusive harmonies in the very brief No.9. Rachmaninov brings the set to a noble though modest close with elegiac No.10.

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13 Preludes, Op.32

No.1 in C (Allegro vivace)
No.2 in B flat minor (Allegretto)
No.3 in E (Allegro vivace)
No.4 in E minor (Allegro con brio)
No.5 in G (Moderato)
No.6 in F minor (Allegro appassionato)
No.7 in F (Moderato)
No.8 in A minor (Vivo)
No.9 in A (Allegro moderato)
No.10 in B minor (Lento)
No.11 in B (Allegretto)
No.12 in G sharp minor (Allegro)
No.13 in D flat (Grave – Allegro)

In 1910, when Rachmaninov composed his 13 Preludes, Op.32, we know for sure that he had consciously decided to complete an overarching set of 24, one in each of the major and minor keys – if nothing else, for the simple reason that Op.32's pieces fill in the gaps in keys left by the Preludes we heard earlier. By now, the composer was at the height of his powers: he was a revered international figure, and he had premiered his mighty Third Piano Concerto in New York the previous year, to enormous acclaim. His musical style had also developed, as the Op. 32 Preludes demonstrate: Rachmaninov's more recent works were more harmonically advanced, but also more angular and muscular, as if he were absorbing the new modernist musical currents eddying around him.

He was also in huge demand as a pianist, conductor and composer, which meant that managing his time effectively became crucial. From autumn to spring, Rachmaninov's calendar was chock-full of concert engagements. His time for composing, therefore, came only in brief summer months. It's perhaps not surprising, then, that he wrote his Op.32 Preludes in just 19 days, composing three of them – Nos.5, 11 and 12 – on a single day (23 August 1910). The pieces' first performance came on 5 December 1911 in St Petersburg, when Rachmaninov himself premiered them as part of a concert series organised by Siloti.

After the brief but dazzling firecracker of No.1 come the rich, exotic harmonies of No.2. No.3 is a brilliant march, while epic No.4 – the longest piece in the set – is driven perpetually forward by an insistent rhythmic figure. Gentle, lyrical No.5 is followed by the fierce and aggressive No.6, the shortest Prelude of all the 24. No.7 passes its melody between right and left hands, while there's the flavour of a showy Bach toccata to the furious figurations of No.8. After the rich, dense textures of No.9, brooding, stormy No.10 represents a deeply personal response to Swiss symbolist painter Arnold Böcklin's enigmatic image *The Homecoming*, in which a solitary man looks out from a pond to a small house with a single lit window. After dance-like No.11 and intense, restless No.12, Rachmaninov concludes the set in D flat major, the brighter-keyed equivalent to the C sharp minor of his very first Prelude that opened tonight's concert. There are memories of that earlier piece, too, embedded in No.13's textures, and after a stormy central section, it concludes Rachmaninov's entire Prelude survey in a mood of victory, celebration and reflection.

Programme notes © David Kettle, 2025

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