

Dvořák Violin Concerto – selected comparison:
Faust, Prague Philb, Bělohávek
 (11/04) (HARM) HMC90 1833

Martinů

Rhapsody-Concerto, H337^o. Three Madrigals (Duo No 1), H313^o. Duo No 2, H331^o.

Viola Sonata, H355^c

Maxim Rysanov *va*

^bAlexander Sitkovetsky *vn* ^cKatya Apekisheva *pf*

^aBBC Symphony Orchestra / Jiří Bělohávek

BIS (F) (S) BIS2030 (68' • DDD/DSD)



The viola player Maxim Rysanov is the star attraction in this collection of

music from Martinů's last years, during which he was on the move more than once from the United States to Europe. In 1952 he was commissioned by the Principal Viola of Szell's Cleveland Orchestra to write a *Rhapsody-Concerto* in two movements, a form he favoured, and one that liberated him from more conventional structures towards 'fantasy', to coin his own word.

Within all four works there's often a note of poignant nostalgia as the composer casts a backwards look to his Bohemian roots. The *Rhapsody-Concerto* opens in such a vein, with a lyrical string theme that returns in various guises. Rysanov plays it with great expression and there's a spring in his step in the succeeding dance-like episodes. The slow movement follows a similar pattern, its difficulties tossed off by the soloist, the conclusion with viola against side drum a fond farewell.

The remainder of the programme was recorded at Potton Hall. *Three Madrigals* finds Rysanov and violinist Alexander Sitkovetsky equal partners in this inventive and engaging work. Rustic Bohemian sounds dominate the lyrical first movement of the Duo No 2, complementing the introspective slow movement before spirits are lifted in a dashing finale. The Viola Sonata, with Katya Apekisheva in strong support, is the most discursive of the pieces here but she and Rysanov have the measure of it. That distinctive measured dance tune at 1'44" which returns as the first movement's coda is pure magic in their hands. A Martinů CD to play again and again. **Adrian Edwards**

Rachmaninov · Trifonov

Rachmaninov Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op 43^a. Variations on a Theme of Chopin, Op 22. Variations on a Theme of Corelli,

Op 42 Trifonov Rachmaniana

Daniil Trifonov *pf*

^aPhiladelphia Orchestra / Yannick Nézet-Séguin
 DG (F) 479 4970GH (79' • DDD)



The opening bars tell you this is going to be a good 'Pag Rhap'. As things turn out, it is a

great one, clearly up there with the very best. That includes the indispensable benchmark recording with the composer and the same orchestra made in 1934, just six weeks after they had given the premiere under Leopold Stokowski. Let's deal first with DG's sound: in the Rhapsody it is sumptuous, full-bodied and realistic, with a near-perfect balance between piano and orchestra. The Philadelphia's silky strings and characterful woodwind are a joy, while the percussion department is suitably punchy without being overcooked.

The tempo relationships between each variation strike me as ideal and the tricky moments of co-ordination (Var 9, for example) are delivered with spot-on rhythmic precision. Between the hijinks and dashing passagework there is time aplenty to relax: the cellos' entry in No 12, *Tempo di minuetto*, is simply gorgeous, but even better is the heart-melting transition from the end of Var 17 into the famous Var 18, no stand-alone piece here but fully integrated into the musical narrative.

While Trifonov revels in the pianistic gymnastics, he is also alert to the moments of mischief, such as the dying phrase that precedes Var 24, arguably the most technically challenging of the variations – and with what exemplary clarity he handles it. I should like to have heard a more gleeful *glissando* whooping up to the top of the keyboard to launch into the final page, but it hardly matters when being swept along to the work's tumultuous and inexorable conclusion – inexorable, that is, but for the cheeky two final bars, perfectly timed and graded by this partnership. Trifonov and Nézet-Séguin do seem genuinely to be a meeting of musical minds.

The remainder of the disc is given over to solo works, recorded in New York rather than in Philadelphia, but with the same opulent piano tone and natural acoustic. Rachmaninov's *Variations pour le piano sur un thème de F Chopin* (dedicated to Leschetizky) was his first 20th-century solo composition for his own instrument. The theme is the C minor Prelude, Op 28 No 20, presented by Rachmaninov in abbreviated form. You would not be alone in thinking that this wonderfully imaginative work tends to

sprawl over its 22 variations. Rachmaninov himself thought so and intended to issue the work in a shortened version but never did. Trifonov offers his own solution by conflating Var 10 with the latter part of Var 12 and dropping Var 11 altogether. Those who insist on the complete score will demur but, personally, I think this is a beneficial (and seamless) cut – and rather clever. Furthermore, he cuts Vars 18 and 19 (no great loss in my opinion) and doesn't take the repeat in Var 22. Trifonov also provides his own alternative ending, cutting (as most do) the superfluous *presto* final page and inserting a reprise of the original theme, but with Chopin's dynamics inverted: thus Var 22's *pp* conclusion merges into the opening bars of the Prelude at *pp*, building to an *ff* ending. For me, this is the most convincing realisation of Rachmaninov's Op 22 I have yet heard. At its heart is Var 16, surely one of the composer's greatest melodic inspirations, on a par with the *Paganini* Var 28 (and recorded as such many years ago in a lush piano-and-orchestra arrangement by Semprini). Avoiding the temptation of saccharine melancholy, Trifonov plays this, *sans rubato*, with exquisite tenderness.

If this variation can be seen as a forerunner of the homesick Rachmaninov, it is the same emotion that inspired Trifonov's own eponymous suite of five short movements. 'I had been in the US for two or three months, I was 18 years old, away from my parents for the first time, so far from home,' he confesses in the booklet. Expressing his nostalgia for his roots, *Rachmaniana* is 'a kind of homage to Rachmaninov' who, like Trifonov, had made a home in the New World. While there are recognisable references to and figurations borrowed from various Preludes and *Études-tableaux* (not to mention the inevitable bells!), the writing rises above mere pastiche into a highly effective recital piece.

Finally, there are the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli* (without any textual interventions), a performance on a par with that of the *Chopin Variations*. In a work that can become unduly sombre (Richard Farrell – Atoll, 1/11) or dry and detached (Nikolai Lugansky, glassy-toned, in the same programme minus, of course, *Rachmaniana* – Warner, 12/04), Trifonov shapes the 20 brief separate entries into a satisfying whole, revealing the richness and fertility of Rachmaninov's invention. While I still admire André Watts's assertive account from 1968 (Philips, 8/99 – listen to his fiery *Intermezzo*), the young Russian is a more beguiling, lyrical companion.

Jeremy Nicholas