

# Transcendent TALENT

Already in his short career, the 25-year-old Daniil Trifonov is being compared to history's greatest pianists, with audiences and critics grappling for superlatives. *Claire Jackson* meets him

**T**he Russian pianist Daniil Trifonov strolls around the wings of Munich's Gasteig concert hall. As he walks, he seems relaxed but steady, his head bowed in deep thought.

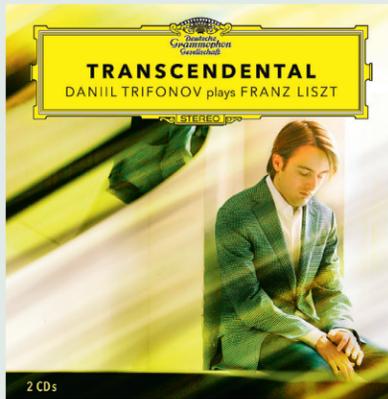
On stage, the Munich Philharmonic reaches the climax of Ravel's *Boléro*. There is a break in the music. We enter; stage-door left. Trifonov takes his place at the piano. I sit as close to the stage as I dare. It may be a rehearsal, but it is a rehearsal with Valery Gergiev no less, and I'm not sure how the maestro feels about journalists sitting in on his pow wows. The members of the Munich Philharmonic sit attentively, but the atmosphere is relaxed. Latecomers arrive, although there's no remonstrance. Trifonov finishes warming up, and Gergiev raises his hand. The inimitable chords of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto follow. Every so often, Trifonov glances into the piano to look at his iPad, which holds the score. I only know this because I saw him take it on stage – the device is completely hidden from view. The sound of the Gasteig, home to the Munich Philharmonic, is first rate, although Gergiev, one-time conductor of the Barbican-based London Symphony Orchestra, seems to have swapped one brutalist concert hall for another. Trifonov leans on the keyboard in error. 'Is that what it says on your computer?' jokes Gergiev. Trifonov, unassuming in skinny jeans, black-rimmed glasses and a thick beard, grins broadly, and continues. ▶

DARIO ACOSTA/DG



**FIRST LISTEN**

Malcolm Hayes on Trifonov's disc



TRIFONOV RESPONDS to the music's extreme technical demands with, seemingly, huge resources still in reserve. Sonically, he's able to astonish: the ultra-tricky 'La Campanella' is delivered with a mesmerising blend of gorgeousness and needlepoint precision. His way with the *Transcendental Studies* is strikingly introspective and memorable. See Hayes's full review next issue.

A SMALL CROWD gathers just outside Trifonov's dressing room – musician friends of the pianist, crossing paths in a way that schedules sometimes serendipitously allow. His head appears around the door; I am ushered in. I bring tea – black, as requested. I have also brought a small gift for my interviewee: a chocolate bar adorned with a keyboard decoration. The gesture fails to raise a smile. I ask about Trifonov's recent stint in New York. He says it was great because he got engaged. Delighted, I enthuse at this news, asking where he proposed. It proves too much. 'That's personal,' says Trifonov, falling silent. Slightly crestfallen – I had no intention of asking about the engagement – I retrace my steps back to musical territory: Trifonov's forthcoming Liszt disc, *Transcendental*, due for release via Deutsche Grammophon in October.

'It was very challenging to record this repertoire because it is physically exhausting,' says Trifonov, after another pause. 'After the recording session I felt like I did not need to practise for a week.' The pianist chooses his words as carefully as he does his notes, speaking slowly, his sentences perfectly constructed, his accent unmistakably Russian.

Liszt's *Transcendental Etudes* are known to be some of the most difficult works in the repertoire (see box, p29). Trifonov played them as part of his 2014-15 season, but agrees they live up to their reputation: 'The challenge is not each individual piece; it's how to make a



**A RUSSIAN MASTER:** Trifonov performs Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 1, with the New York Philharmonic under Juanjo Mena, in 2014

cohesive cycle. A lot of concentration is needed. In a way, the work is autobiographical: in each etude there is much expression. It feels like the music represents Liszt's personal experiences, or an imaginary character – the life of a poet. Liszt juxtaposes the lyrical and virtuosic etudes throughout the cycle until the music suddenly becomes introverted.'

**'It feels like the music represents Liszt's personal experiences'**

For *Transcendental* the *Transcendental Etudes* are paired with the *Paganini Etudes*, separated by a collection of concert etudes. These etudes aren't studies in the traditional sense. 'An etude usually means a piece that expresses a particular technical problem,' says Trifonov. 'Even in Chopin's etudes, each piece has a type of difficulty. In the case of Liszt's etudes, it feels more free, more like poems.'

Trifonov has made a name for himself as an interpreter of core, traditional – 'serious', some

might say – 19th-century repertoire: Chopin, Scriabin, Rachmaninov, Liszt et al. But the 25 year-old is keen to take on 20th-century stalwarts, too: he cites Shostakovich, Ligeti, Copland and Messiaen as on his 'to do' list. His programme for 2016-17 is set to include works by Schumann and Stravinsky.

He composes, but admits that he's not able to listen to much contemporary music. Although this is not a conscious act – a world-famous concert pianist can only do so much, after all – this approach may prove advantageous. Context is vital, but creatives must plough their own furrow. Trifonov agrees: 'I try not to think of certain styles when I am composing. For me, composition is about the expression of emotional aspects of myself.'

**JOINING THE GREATS**

Trifonov has been compared to the pianist-composers of yesteryear, with comparisons to Liszt, Rachmaninov and perhaps even Busoni. It's a heavy burden to place on one man's shoulders, but Trifonov appears to take it in his stride. So-called 'golden ages' are often viewed through a rose-tinted lens, but the mid-20th century was undeniably a period of greatness for pianism. It's a time that intrigues

an aptitude for composition. He was clearly gifted, and when he was nine, his parents enrolled him into Gnessin. Trifonov's mother was a music teacher herself, and his father was a composer; both were supportive – but never exploitive – of their only child's unusual talent. 'The whole family moved to Moscow. At the time, we lived in a suburb, so it would have taken too long to get to school,' he says. 'It was a very productive time, but my teacher wanted me to focus on studying, rather than concerts. Only later, at the age of 16, I started performing more and going to competitions.'

And not just any competitions: in 2011 Trifonov entered the Rubinstein and Tchaikovsky competitions, two of the most prestigious contests in the world, set in Tel-Aviv and Moscow, respectively. Having scooped first prize in the Rubinstein, Trifonov went on to win the gold medal at the Tchaikovsky, garnering praise from Martha Argerich. A glittering career beckoned.

Trifonov's life began to change dramatically. 'After the Rubinstein and Tchaikovsky competitions the number of concerts increased, so I had to get used to a new lifestyle. It became different quite rapidly and it took a lot of discipline to control the schedule,' he says, reaching for the chocolate bar. He unwraps it delicately and takes a bite. 'It's good,' he mumbles, 'the last time I ate was breakfast.' I explain the saying 'make hay while the sun shines'. He agrees that it would have been easy to over commit. 'I try to keep the number of concerts I do a year under 100.'

Nonetheless, performing 100 concerts a year still makes for a busy schedule. After Munich, Trifonov will head to the Verbier Festival, and then he's in the UK to play Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21 at the Proms (7 Sept) – with a smattering of other engagements in between. As well as the iPad ('with new pieces I prefer to learn on the actual score, but when it's something that I've already played then it helps to save on luggage!') he has developed ways to cope while on tour: 'I have two homes, one in Moscow and now one in New York,' he says. 'In Moscow I have a Steinway and in New York I have a Fazioli. I enjoy playing on both pianos.'

'For different repertoire each piano has a special philosophy and the touch is also quite different. In general I like to play on different pianos. My teacher Sergei Babayan told me to play different pianos each day – one hour in one room, one hour in another – so this way there would not be any getting used to one instrument. It's an adventure – you can always be discovering.'

It's this sense of musical exploration that makes Trifonov such an intriguing pianist. His technique is watertight, naturally, but it is his sound that makes him so special. It's

**A QUICK GUIDE TO...**

Liszt's *Transcendental Etudes*



**VIRTUOSIC:** pianist Georges Cziffra records Liszt

LISZT'S ECCENTRICITIES, success and cool originality inspired detractors at points throughout his career. He was a true pianist-composer, and nowhere is this more evident than in the *Etudes d'exécution transcendante* – the *Transcendental Etudes*. The etudes foreshadowed the tonality that would later be explored in expressionism, and marked Liszt as a cutting-edge modernist.

They began as a set of sketches penned by Liszt in the early 19th century. When he published them in the format we know today, the music was deemed virtually unplayable. The title is something of a misnomer – an etude was traditionally thought of as an exploration of a particular technique; although the genre was popularised by Cramer, Czerny and Clementi, it was transformed under Chopin, Alkan and Liszt. The Romantic composers turned mechanical detail into music for its own sake – the *Transcendental Etudes* are often referred to as poems, rather than studies.

Liszt's *Transcendental Etudes* comprise 12 works. The collection was dedicated to Liszt's teacher Czerny, and the pieces went on to inspire etudes by Lyapunov, Anton Rubinstein and Rachmaninov, as well as Moszkowski, Saint-Saëns, Blumenfeld and Dohnányi.

Recordings of the full set of *Transcendental Etudes* remain unusual, although there are some strong options to choose from. Leslie Howard's complete recording of Liszt's piano music (Hyperion) contains the full set, as does Jorge Bolet on RCA, which is available on CD via Sony. Claudio Arrau's recording (Philips) is a favourite among pianophiles, as is Georges Cziffra's (above) on EMI.

Alice Sara Ott has recorded the set for Deutsche Grammophon and Jean Müller offered his version for independent label Fondamenta (don't be put off by the low-fi cover artwork: this recording is one of the best). Kirill Gerstein has also just released his recording of all 12 etudes on Myrios Classics, which will be reviewed next issue.





## DANIIL TRIFONOV

The best recordings so far...



### Rachmaninov Variations on a Theme of Chopin; Variations on a theme of Corelli etc

Daniil Trifonov (piano), Philadelphia Orchestra/ Yannick Nézet-Séguin DG 479 4970

'Trifonov's range of colour and imagination in the *Corelli Variations* is mesmerising. The earlier *Chopin Variations* are also projected with brilliance, staggering clarity of fingerwork and lightness of timbre.' December 2015



### Trifonov Live, including the Carnegie Hall Recital Works by Liszt Chopin, Scriabin et al

Daniil Trifonov (piano) DG 479 3795

'In the Carnegie recital, Trifonov's levels of energy and inspiration would probably be enough to fuel at least two usual pianists... His sensitivity to atmosphere allows Scriabin's Sonata No. 2 to burst into colourful and fantastical flame.' December 2014



### Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 1, plus works by Chopin and Liszt

Daniil Trifonov (piano) Mariinsky Orchestra/ Valery Gergiev Mariinsky MAR0530

'Trifonov has made the most hardened piano lovers sit up and take notice. His special blend of attributes is on display here, not least his technical ease, exquisite control and rich resource of colour.' December 2012



### Daniil Trifonov The Magics of Music A film by Christopher Nupen

Christopher Nupen Films A19CND The renowned filmmaker turns his lens on the pianist, building up an intimate portrait of his life. The film includes a recital that Trifonov gave in Italy.



IN GREAT COMPANY: conductor Valery Gergiev presents the 2011 Tchaikovsky Competition grand prize to Daniil Trifonov in St Petersburg

wonderfully varied; every phrase is considered, and there is detail in each note. We feel the deep sense of preparation behind the music. Trifonov turns to the upright in his dressing room to demonstrate some of the exercises he worked on to learn Rachmaninov's concertos.

'Rachmaninov was challenging in the beginning because I started playing it quite late, when I was 20 or 21, and I had to find new ways of using my body. I came up with new practice regimens, one of which was in the swimming pool, to free up the shoulder blades.

## Trifonov's sound makes him so special; every note is detailed

It's important to use not only the hand, but also the spine,' he opines. 'The energy comes from the shoulder blade, not the arm or the finger.'

I ask about the swimming – was he swimming lengths or doing some special stretches? 'No,' he says, 'I was practising. Actually playing. It has to be slower, as there is resistance, so you can't really play normally. So in the swimming pool it would look something like this.' He plays a slowed-down phrase. And this was in a private pool? 'No, I knew people would think it looks weird, but I had a first performance of Rachmaninov Two the next day – so I had to take care of it.

Trifonov leaves no stone unturned in his creative endeavours: 'I am interested in the construction of a piece, the harmony, the smallest details and how it all works,' he says. 'Throughout the process, the interpretation

evolves. It's a bit like a surfer on a wave – there is a certain flow that you need to go with.'

### A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

Munich is even more beautiful at dusk. Its many statues become shadowy, its architecture more textured. The Odeonsplatz, the city's large, imposing square, has been transformed into an open-air arena, with a stage set up on the pantheon. The Munich Philharmonic are seated here, ensconced by huge stone pillars and flanked by two enormous lion statues. A dazzling array of stage lights, cameras and speakers complete the panorama. It's an impressive – if a little intimidating – setting for this special concert. Crowd control is slick, and the whole event is impeccably organised. Trifonov takes his seat at the piano.

The pianist's hands are so close to the keyboard that his fingers are practically resting on the keys. The lightness of touch in the upper octave passages of the first movement of Tchaikovsky's First Concerto is breathtaking. In the scurrying passages of the final *Allegro*, Trifonov leans so close to the piano, he's almost bent double. It is like watching the swish of fine silk.

Usually, the view of a pianist's hands is reserved for audience members at the front, generally on the left-hand side. Here, the whole square can enjoy Trifonov's technique at close range, as his performance is projected on to a huge screen and broadcast worldwide. This concerto has been heard many times before, but this evening it feels different. We applaud, knowing we've heard something special – a sound that can be dark, joyous, effervescent, transportive – and truly transcendental. ■

Trifonov's new solo Liszt recording is out on Deutsche Grammophon on 7 October