

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)
Prelude in C-sharp Minor

Rachmaninoff composed the Prelude in C-sharp minor in the late summer of 1892, at the age of 18, and first performed it at the Moscow Electric Exhibition in September of 1892. This was the beginning of the career of one of the world's most popular piano pieces - it shortly became known simply as "The Prelude." Audiences would clamor for it by shouting "C-sharp minor!" while applauding other pieces, and even towards the end of Rachmaninoff's career it was reported that no recital of his ever ended without this prelude as a final encore.

The immense popularity of this prelude perhaps even made it harder for Rachmaninoff to reach out with his later works, which were always viewed and understood in terms of his early success and the Prelude's status as a near-popular song. Critics have often been quick to highlight their own superiority by dismissing the C-sharp minor prelude as a shallow and mediocre work.

It is tempting to describe this piece in terms of paradox: it sounds sensationally virtuosic and looks very difficult to play—both in terms of the score's layout and in the gestures and movements required by the pianist—yet it by no means belongs to the most difficult piano repertoire and is often approached and mastered by advanced amateur pianists. Its musical content is really simple and could perhaps even be called thin, but so far it hasn't lost any of its massive effect and promises to live on and speak as powerfully to future generations.

The atmosphere of the first section may be likened to a solemn procession or ritual; in contrast, the chromatic sequential phrases in the second section (measures 14-42) are almost frantic. When the first theme returns, it is in "a mood of grandeur and power, as if illustrating the inevitable survival of some great and mighty truth" (Godowsky), but the Coda returns to the mysterious and reflective atmosphere - as if the question posed at the beginning is left unanswered after all.

The juxtaposed fortissimo and pianissimo passages suggest the tolling of bells and their echoes, and the piece picked up its nickname, "The Bells of Moscow," quite early in its life. As for its inspiration, Rachmaninoff once told an interviewer: "...one day the prelude simply came and I put it down. It came with such force that I could not shake it off even though I tried to do so. It had to be - so there it was".

Source:

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