

Metamorphoses

Songs by Rachmaninov

Nocturnes by Debussy

arranged by Alfonso Soldano

ALFONSO
SOLDANO

piano

Metamorphoses

Piano transcriptions by Alfonso Soldano

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943):

1	Your beauty is that of a flower, Op. 8 No. 2	2:39
2	All was taken from me, Op. 26 No. 2	1:27
3	Morning, Op. 4 No. 2	2:56
4	A Dream, Op. 8 No. 5	2:49
5	Do you remember that evening, Op. Posth.	2:38
6	Oh I beg you, do not leave!, Op. 4 No. 1	1:37
7	Dusk was falling, Op. Posth.	4:19
8	Water Lily, Op. 8 No. 1	1:21
9	Do not believe me, friend, Op. 14 No. 7	2:31
10	Night is sorrowful, Op. 26 No. 12	2:51
11	They replied, Op. 21 No. 4	2:52
12	How peaceful, Op. 21 No. 7	3:00
13	Summer nights, Op. 14 No. 5	2:17
14	In the silence of the secret night, Op. 4 No. 3	3:48
15	Spring Torrents, Op. 14 No. 11	2:28

Claude Debussy (1862-1918):

16	L'Enfant prodigue – Prelude	3:23
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Nocturnes

17	I	Nuages	8:23
18	II	Fêtes	6:55
19	III	Sirènes	12:28

Total playing time:

71:10

Metamorphoses

The "transcription" and "paraphrase" are elaborative processes of the musical world that have not enjoyed sufficient consideration over the years, but have instead gradually taken the path of misunderstanding and trivialization, to the point of becoming works of trade. The great instrumentalists who have left traces of these processes in their productions have done so, however, maintaining their strong identity and a link with the music expressed, and this has kept the individual works alive, making them shine with a light of their own (just think of the highly personal versions of the Scherzo from Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, transcribed by Rachmaninov, or to any of the great paraphrases by Liszt or Thalberg). Transcriptions, as well as paraphrases, can be conceived not as intellectual borrowings or mere transpositions, but, in the most cultured sense, as compositions that have a life of their own.

Even in films there is the so-called spin-off genre, which takes its cue from a main plot, to continue in a narrative universe in its own right. In transcriptions or paraphrases, the same happens, and therefore the art of transcribing, so called in general, can be considered to be a specific musical genre. Charles Rosen, the world-renowned pianist and music theorist, clarified the nature of this genre, and its not too subtle importance, through a more than effective comparison: playing piano music, originally conceived by other musicians, according to their own style, and for different instrumental groupings (orchestra, chamber ensembles, vocals, operas), is an invention that is equally crucial to that of black and white photography; in fact, before the advent of that technology, there was no way to extend the reach of something like the works of art in a museum, difficult for many to reach. And in any case, even the black

and white photography, while not being able to restore the expressiveness of the original object and its colors, was perfectly able to give substantial fidelity to the features of the work. The transcription offers all this in the same way: technologically more advanced machines give better information about the image in the photo; more personal vein, stylistic and instrumental knowledge give better information than the original music in the transcription, even, in rare cases, becoming a work of parallel reality and equally valid as the original (the transcription by Ravel of *La Valse* for two pianos for example).

The history of the piano instrument, in continuous evolution, even in style, has seen the genre of transcription grow in parallel. The transcriber is to be considered, nowadays, for all intents and purposes as an author. This author sometimes manages to create an almost perfect copy, on a principal instrument like the piano, but with different characteristics than the original; sometimes he creates a new, small work of art in his turn, therefore, which becomes a real "metamorphosis". It would be easy to identify, back in history, the reason for the birth of the transcription phenomenon on the piano, which emerged for the popular needs of the composers themselves: on the piano you can play almost everything, much more economically than with the original ensemble, orchestra, voices or other combinations, and make it usable, as long as you have an performer with extraordinary skills as the "instrument".

The difficulty, sometimes misunderstood due to the ornamental abuse of the Biedermeier period, is conceived as pertinent to the quality of the music to be expressed, by treating in a refined manner the totality (desired) of the orchestral parts to be proposed, not to be renounced. Can two hands become an orchestra, or a singer, or more singers? According to many, absolutely yes. One of the first pharaonic promoters of this centrality of the pianist, markedly announced

through his transcriptions, was certainly Liszt. A true artist can nobly play a transcription, as if it were an original piece, as long as he has his own gratification in exchange, not of mere acrobatic praise, but of artistic hegemony: the pianist can do it all by himself. This was also a sort of revenge for the piano, which up to the beginning of the nineteenth century played a far more marginal role and was chiefly used as accompaniment of someone "superior", in the context of public concerts.

The transcription and the coloristic paraphrase expressed a very subtle revenge against this old structure. The piano has certainly won its battle in the space of a hundred years, thanks to this musical genre, being able to confront itself directly with the "rivals" of other groups, and managing to bear the weight of captivating the attention of vast audiences, completely alone. For us, in our day, this is normal, but just before Liszt, Chopin, or Schumann were born, things were different. When the genre became established and stratified through compositional development and experiment, it was a matter of starting to "fill" the gaps in the piano repertoire, through things that could certainly "sound" well on the piano, given their intrinsic nature, but which had not yet been transcribed, or previously taken into consideration.

The phenomenology of listening allows all human faculties to converge in the direction of sound, of the idea, of a "magical moment". And the compositions presented here have the aim of increasing this artistic hope. The masterful inspiration of some transcribers pushed me to throw a stone in the pond towards works, which are attractive, if yet unexplored for transcription, allied to the potential of the piano. In fact, seeking absolute fidelity to the creative world of the composers exhibited here and to the balance of the tessitura after

years of assiduous study, I wished to bring these themes back to the listener, modeled so that they sound as if they had been originally written for the piano.

15 Songs by Rachmaninov

Sergei Rachmaninov, an artist capable of recounting the infinite variables of the human soul, and a worthy successor of Tchaikovsky, expresses a bond of steel with his native land, and with his Romances for voice and piano (about 74, including 12 published posthumously), he also allows the “foreign” listener a total immersion, thanks to the magnetic power of his at times self-referential music. Studying in depth the totality of the composer’s output, one can reflect on the extreme popularity and exposure of the best known works, from orchestral music to the famous Concertos and the impressive works for solo piano; but the core of Rachmaninov’s world can be highlighted in the Romances.

These short but intense compositions kept him busy all his life, and not out of fleeting enthusiasm, but out of very strong cohesion with the texts of Russian poets and authors so familiar to him. These gems contain, in addition to the best melodies of the composer, also the fulcrum of his musical intentions and a surprising ability to manage the dynamic relationship between the voice and the instrument, in themselves dissimilar in texture, as an expert “liederist.”

Looking at the creative horizon of the Romances, or Songs, it is possible to outline a picture of stories, representations, ways of living, memories, which say a lot, almost everything, about the soul of Rachmaninoff the man, beyond the mere musician. It is possible to notice the lights and shadows of an entire musical tradition, so this work should be considered on the same level as Schubert’s *Winterreise* or *Schwanengesang*, in terms of its artistic value. In such a large and representative pool of work, only the language has put a brake, in

part, on the total fruition of production. It is for this reason that the choice of many songs within this series does not follow the same choices already wisely transcribed by a great artist like Earl Wild. The transcription work, in addition to trying to make these pieces like real morceaux for piano, is intended to intrigue the listener so that in reading the Russian poetic text on which the composition is based, may more effectively absorb its content.

Debussy: *Prelude from l'Enfant Prodigue*

Written for the Grand Prix de Rome 1884 by the brilliant young musician Claude Debussy, who later became one of the greatest composers of the twentieth century, the cantata *L'enfant prodigue* (opera scene) is intended for soloists, choir and orchestra. Debussy, twenty-two years old, won the prestigious prize with it and brilliantly concluded his course of studies at the Conservatory.

The work is affected by numerous influences, including Massenet certainly, but even after its original lukewarm reception, it leaves evident traces of some of the peculiar traits of the French composer's personality. More daring chord solutions, swinging rhythmic arrangement, use of registers – these already give a clear idea of Debussy's spirit. Pages such as *Cortège*, or *Air de danse*, have become better known thanks to the crystalline transcription for four hands on the piano by the composer himself, and it is of some interest to note also the way in which Debussy treats the emotional themes of the cantata, which through the musical medium, presages the reservedness of a work such as *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

Edouard Guinand's text is touched by the "painter of music", Debussy, with extreme delicacy but he carefully avoids falling into the sentimentality so much

in vogue at the time. In the story of Lia who is desperate, at dawn, for the escape of her son Azael, rebellious and isolated in stubbornly wanting to discover the wonders of the world, there is a great current. And in a modern way Debussy offers a detailed musical portrait with this substantial one-act work. Beyond the story of Azael's painful return home, welcomed by his mother, what transpires from this unfairly mistreated little masterpiece, is the purest manifestation of the overflowing talent of a genius just twenty, ready for new creative horizons. Here, the Prelude, in B Major, *Andante, très calme*, beginning the work, is the flower with which Debussy opens his story with dark tones, but approaching the listener on tiptoe, whispering the almost surreal atmosphere, with incredible purity.

Three Nocturnes

Claude Debussy, "the painter of music", did not like the definition of "impressionist", referring to his musical language, but in the Nocturnes also the title takes on a different connotation. "The sense is in fact more decorative, more spatial", quoted Debussy in a short descriptive text) and the gestation of this work was quite troubled, prior to the success of the first performance at the Concerts Lamoureux, which took place for the first two parts on 9 December 1900, and for the complete set on October 27, 1901, with the conductor Camille Chevillard on both occasions.

This work, composed precisely at the dawn of the new century, brought with it a magnificent series of novelties, both in expression and in orchestration, but the idea is older; Debussy had already thought of these compositions in 1892 (sketched under the title of *Three Twilight Scenes*, as Debussy stated in a letter to Prince Andr  Poniatowski), with the aim of carrying out "a search among the

opportunities for studying color") and he had drawn up a version for violin and orchestra, then remodeled and orchestrated the final version in the period 1897-1899. The usual pattern of the *Notturmo* is abandoned to embrace a more fluid structure, and the external suggestions, firmly traceable to the music, are clearly evident. The exquisite beauty of this music is objectively Impressionist, and even if against the author's wish, it follows the main characteristics of that school. In fact we may define the *Nocturnes* as the first great Impressionist orchestral work of the century, a fresco in three symphonic movements, which after the *Prélude à l'après midi d'un faune*, is proposed as a series of paintings, distinct but united by a thin thread. Each of the *Nocturnes* evokes a specific and sensual scenario, and is inspired by Henri de Régnier's *Poèmes anciens et romanesques* (rich in symbolism and dreamlike images), in addition to the enigmatic paintings, also titled "Nocturnes", by the painter James Whistler.

Nuages

Although Debussy considered himself a melodist, the genius in *Nuages* lies in painting the image of the free, slow and melancholy gait of the clouds through the immutable aspect of the sky, without offering any melodic coordinates. In *Nuages* the melody becomes an idea that is not necessarily connected and discursive, but an event full of sensations, in the total absence of a canonical climax, almost with the intention of not offering the listener any moments of reference.

Within the magic of the piece, time seems suspended, and the interventions of the English horn do not sound like a recapitulation, but like the most perfect description of an eternal cyclical nature. The biographer Lèon Vallas shared Debussy's thoughts on the genesis of the work with these words: "One day, in

stormy weather, while Debussy was crossing the Pont de la Concorde in Paris, he told him the idea of the symphonic work [Nuages] that had come to mind on such a day: he had focused his gaze on those storm clouds blown away by a stormy wind, and to accompany the scenery, a boat that passed slowly, with its horn sound. If one adjective can best describe this work, it is this: *hypnotic*.

Fêtes

Debussy, in his presentation paper, defines this work by giving the sense of a vibrant and dancing rhythmic atmosphere, characterized by sudden, flashes of light. Interposing in this luminous succession is the figure of a fantastic festival procession, which crosses the scene in a fantastic mix of color. But the unpredictable nature of these elements produces a fabric of riproaring passion. The vibrancy of the piece provides a sharp contrast to the sweet stillness of *Nuages*, such as to transport the listener to different dimensions altogether.

According to Léon Vallas in his biography of the composer, *Fêtes* was inspired by a memory of a party in the Bois de Boulogne, with a crowd of people watching drumming, lights, fireworks and the parade march of the Garde Nationale. I'd describe this work overall as *dazzling*.

Sirènes

Debussy's biographer, Léon Vallas, related the composer' description of this movement and the song of the sirens being inspired by "Harmonies in Blue and Silver", a painting by James Abbott McNeill Whistler, one of his favorites.

Sirènes, which is in tripartite form like *Fêtes*, is however less linear in its exposition and has a highly visual characteristic desired by Debussy, as if it

were already material for the cinema circuit: the female choir (without text), which evokes, with a seductive dirge, the irresistible song of the sirens, and the waves of the sea.

The very strong symbolic matrix of the entire work is manifested in the elements that surround the whole content: in *Nuages* the sky (and the clouds), in *Fêtes* the light, and in *Sirènes* the sea. From its very first bars, in iambic rhythm, the music becomes powerful and suggestive, the perfect apex of the set. The vivacity of the harmonic changes and the coloratura of the tremolos joins the singing in an ecstasy of absolute perfection, until it is transformed naturally into a distant echo, a vanished mirage.

Sirènes is truly *bewitching*.



Desidero dedicare tutto a Stefania.

I wish to dedicate all my work to Stefania.

Volontà

Will

La volontà coglie l'Abisso,
l'ideale che naviga lontano.
S'allontana profondo il canto delle
Sirene,
l'immagine dell'abbagliante bellezza,
il calore festoso, avvolto dalla
misteriosa oscurità.
Immutabile, come nuvole nella lenta
processione,
il vuoto abbraccio al cui pensier,
convien di fuggire.

The will seizes the abyss,
the ideal that sails far away.
Deep away the song of the Sirens,
the image of dazzling beauty,
the festive heat, shrouded in
mysterious darkness.
Immutable, like clouds in the slow
procession,
the empty embrace whose thought,
it is convenient to flee.

Alfonso Soldano

The Pianist and arranger

Alfonso Soldano was born in 1986 in the Puglia (Apulia) region of southern Italy. He completed his five year bachelors and postgraduate courses at the Conservatory "N. Piccinni" in Bari, gaining his Degree in Piano Performance with Honors. He also obtained the High Performance Diploma in Concert Piano Performance at the National Academy of Santa Cecilia in Rome, under Benedetto Lupo. His mentors throughout his artistic life have been Aldo Ciccolini and Pierluigi Camicia. Mr. Soldano has attained first place in many piano competitions and is regularly invited to competitions both as artist and juror in Italy and throughout Europe. He also gives masterclasses all over Italy and has played with a substantial number of major orchestras.

In particular he performed, at age 17, in a production of Rachmaninov's complete works for piano and orchestra, with the Bacau Philharmonic Orchestra. He has worked with conductors such as O. Balan, D. Frandes and M. Cormio and performed with many orchestras, both Italian and from other countries. Mr. Soldano is recognized for his deep and particular sound and breathtaking virtuosity, and is considered by many to be among the foremost Italian talent of his generation. He is one of the last and favourite long-time students of legendary Italian-French pianist Aldo Ciccolini; he has developed a substantial repertoire that includes many solo piano works and numerous concertos with orchestra.

Mr. Soldano has undertaken many concert tours, festivals and events in great halls, such as the Musikum Salzburg, Hindemith Foundation Switzerland, G. Enescu Festival Bucarest, Bacau, several Italian universities (Rome "La Sapienza", Bari) and recitals in major cities including various theaters in Rome

(Parco della Musica), Milan, Verona and Bologna. As a writer he produced the first biography of Russian composer Sergei Bortkiewicz, which was published by Florestano Edizioni.

Alfonso Soldano was awarded a scholarship at Bari Conservatory in 2008 as 'best piano student'; he was a finalist in the 'Società Umanitaria di Milano' competition in 2009 and was awarded the International Gold Medal Prize from 'Maison des Artistes' in Rome for Best Italian Artist in April 2013, with a large ceremony in the University's "La Sapienza" great hall. Mr Soldano is also busy working as a concert transcriber both for MusePress (Japan) and Florestano Edizioni (Italy). He is currently finalizing the publication, with Florestano Edizioni, of a large piano set of concert transcriptions for two pianos.

The great pianists that have heard him have always highlighted the particular interpretative maturity of his performances, the result of continuous insights into the history of piano technique and interpretation. Mr Soldano is currently Professor of Piano performance at the Conservatory U. Giordano in Foggia, following similar posts in Teramo, Taranto and Lecce. Formerly also a professor at S. Cecilia Conservatory in Rome, he is also Artistic Director of the European Arts Academy Foundation "Aldo Ciccolini" in Trani, the town in which he now resides. His recent performance of Tchaikovsky's Second Piano Concerto received strong critical acclaim and was broadcast on Italian regional television.

His recordings for Divine Art have also received great praise from critics around the world.

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