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Rachmaninov | Piano Sonata No.1
Tchaikovsky | The Seasons

Olli Mustonen, piano



ONDINE

Serge Rachmaninov (1873–1943)

Piano Sonata No. 1 in D minor, Op. 28

Of the two Piano Sonatas written by Serge Rachmaninov, the first one in D minor, Op. 28 has been overshadowed by the second and by many of the composer's less ambitious piano works.

Indeed, the composer himself seems to have been unsure about the quality of the Sonata: he began it in 1907 and at some point toyed with the idea of turning it into a symphony, but ultimately decided that the material was too pianistic. Having performed the Sonata privately in 1908, Rachmaninov revised it and gave it to his friend Konstantin Igumnov to premiere it in public.

In writing the Piano Sonata in D minor, Rachmaninov associated it with Goethe's *Faust*, from which he picked the titles of its movements: *Faust*, *Gretchen*, *Mephistopheles* and *Flight to the Brocken*. The structure recalls the *Faust Symphony* and B minor Sonata of Liszt; the enigmatic motto of the latter seems to have inspired the network that emerges from a single suggestive theme in Rachmaninov's Sonata. However, when Rachmaninov eventually published the Sonata, he discarded all the programmatic references.

This was a change for the better, since the D minor Sonata tackles Faustian problematics more as an intellectual challenge than as a descriptive project. As an intellectual and monumental construct, it recalls the late piano sonatas of Beethoven. It is an anomaly in Rachmaninov's output, and he himself described it as "wild and unending".

The First Piano Sonata is so bewilderingly full of action, abrupt shifts and throwaway references that only a first-rate performer can do justice to its overall shape. The exposition of the first movement (*Allegro moderato*) is symbolic, meditative and characterized by the bell-like tones of which the composer was so fond. A virtuoso impulse transforms the music into a heroic and epic narrative.



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The roiling texture allows room for Slavic nostalgia, but there are none of the bittersweet melodies so typical for Rachmaninov. The ending of the movement caused the composer much trouble, and after the coda he made an extensive cut; the material thus removed from the original version ended up in the Étude Tableau in D minor, Op. 33. In the 1908's version, the conclusion returns to a variant of the exposition.

The slow movement (*Lento*) employs a lyrical but dispersed texture whose point-like melodic patterns refer back to the opening movement. Polyphonic lines take the place of soaring melodies, but the drama of the movement is pure Romanticism in its passionate escalations and recessions. This emotional balancing act may have been derived from the young maiden's insecurity of Gretchen, and the conclusion which slides from scintillating trills to tranquillity supports this conjecture.

The finale (*Allegro molto*) is the most complex movement of the Sonata. Its tempo and energy drive it relentlessly forward, with themes and briefer motifs immersed in a bravura texture that trumps those of the previous movements. The orchestral force of the sonority is quite without parallel: the composer seems to have divided the keyboard into instrument groups whose combinations govern the immense sound. The demonic elements culminate in the almost stealthy emergence of the *Dies irae* motif, which makes its menacing presence known in a number of Rachmaninov's works.

In the quieter moments, the music also reflects the archaic tones of the Orthodox *znamenny* chants, and Russian church bells can clearly be heard in the intoxicating closing scene. The D minor Sonata is so opulent and demanding that it is almost overpowering, but it is also a necessary reminder of how serious and how versatile a composer Rachmaninov was.



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Peter Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)

The Seasons, Op. 37b

When Peter Tchaikovsky wrote *The Seasons*, Op. 37b (*Les Saisons – Vremena goda*), he was not thinking of either the realistic programmes of Vivaldi's Violin Concertos or the symbolic narrative of Haydn's oratorio of the same name.

The idea for writing this piano cycle came from Nikolai Bernard, editor of *Nouvelliste* magazine, who needed piano pieces suitable for domestic use for his readers. Tchaikovsky turned this project into a sort of serial for himself, instructing his servant to remind him when the monthly deadline approached.

The secret of the success of Tchaikovsky's *Seasons* is in their spontaneity: each of the miniatures was written at the appropriate time of year. Tchaikovsky traced an intimate portrait of each month, relating to the everyday lives of people.

Spanning the period from December 1875 to November 1876, the project comes across as the diary of a Russian composer. The titles in French recall aristocratic salons, but what the music describes is the life of people in the north. *Janvier* opens the cycle with a scene by the fire (*Au coin du feu*), a melodic vignette contrasting the idyllic home with the cold and dark outside.

Février is a time for carnival, for eating blinis and going for sleigh rides in the frost before the great fast of the Orthodox Church. Here we find Russian boisterousness and opulence in full spate (*Carnaval*). *Mars* brings the song of the skylark (*Chant de l'alouette*), although its melancholy strains seem to indicate that it would have preferred to stay in the south.

Avril is a waltz burgeoning with hope as the first flowers open (*Perce-neige*) and the snow melts so rapidly that the pianist's fingers slip on the keyboard. *Mai* has gentle nights (*Les Nuits de mai*) that are the province of dreamers. *Juin* is represented by a



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Barcarolle which is one of the best-known numbers in the cycle. Its wistful tone and the happy images in its central section seem to hint at the transitory nature of all things.

Juillet is represented by the song of a reaper (*Chant du faucheur*), which should not be taken autobiographically – Tchaikovsky probably never touched a scythe in his life. The sun seems to be shining from on high, and the mowing is touched with a sense of celebration. In **Août**, things are getting busy with the harvest (*La Moisson*). The grain must be brought in quickly, but fortunately there is also time to enjoy the scenery in the middle section.

The hunt is an obligatory feature of any composition depicting the seasons, and **Septembre** is no exception (*La Chasse*). Tchaikovsky was not keen on shooting animals, and the keyboard fanfares he wrote here seem more of a tribute to the majesty of nature in full autumn colours. In **Octobre**, everything seems to have stopped, and here Tchaikovsky is in touch with his own melancholy too (*Chant d'automne*). He was himself suffering from depression at the time. The middle section is slightly more positive, though.

Novembre features some new hope, as the snow begins to fall and the crispness of winter settles in. A troika sleigh ride is heard in the middle section. The year ends with the coming of Christmas. For **Décembre**, Tchaikovsky wrote a coquettish waltz, focusing not on the religious nature of the festival but on its convivial aspects, visits and shared meals.

Antti Häyrynen

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Olli Mustonen

Olli Mustonen has established himself as one of the most exciting pianists of his time. Born in Helsinki, he began his studies in piano, harpsichord and composition at the age of five. His first piano teacher was Ralf Gothóni and he subsequently studied piano with Eero Heinonen and composition with Einojuhani Rautavaara.

Mustonen has worked with many of the world's leading orchestras, including the Berlin Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, Boston Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, London Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, Philharmonia Orchestra, New York Philharmonic and the Royal Concertgebouw; and with conductors including Ashkenazy, Barenboim, Berglund, Boulez, Chung, Dutoit, Eschenbach, Harnoncourt, Masur, Salonen, Saraste, Tennstedt, and Vegh. In recital, he frequently plays in the world's music capitals including London, Vienna, Paris, Tokyo and Berlin, appears at leading festivals such as Ravinia and the Hollywood Bowl, and enjoys significant chamber collaborations with partners including Steven Isserlis, Pekka Kuusisto and Joshua Bell. As a conductor, Mustonen has appeared at various venues in Europe and works regularly with major Finnish symphony orchestras. He is also the founding artistic director of the Helsinki Festival Orchestra (2001). In autumn 2003, he took up the post of conductor of the Tapiola Sinfonietta. Olli Mustonen is known, too, as a composer. A CD containing his works was released in 2001 by Ondine to critical acclaim.

Olli Mustonen's recording catalogue is typically broad-ranging and distinctive. He has a long-term recording agreement with Ondine as a pianist and conductor.



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Tapiola Sinfonietta

Based in Espoo, the Tapiola Sinfonietta is one of the top professional orchestras in Finland; its popularity has been swiftly on the rise ever since it was founded in 1987. The Tapiola Sinfonietta is structured as a typical Viennese Classical orchestra, with 41 musicians. The orchestra's distinct sound and its interesting choice of repertoire are its long-established trump cards. The nucleus of the orchestra's repertoire consists of music composed by Mozart and his contemporaries. Alongside the classics, the orchestra performs lesser-known works. Its repertoire includes both older music and works by contemporary composers, which the orchestra is keen to premiere. The Tapiola Sinfonietta also actively promotes Finnish music at home and abroad.



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