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SERGEI RACHMANINOFF
IN HIS OWN WORDS
Edited by Geoffrey Norris

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Rustem Hayroudinoff: Bach & Sons

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Rustem Hayroudinoff’s recording history so far has centred on Rachmaninov, so it is quite a change to find him turning not just to JS Bach but to the four sons of his who became professional composers. But there is more significance to this album than that, for it marks the pianist’s return to the studio since recovering from the career-threatening condition of focal dystonia, diagnosed in 2017 and recounted by him in a *Gramophone* blog in March. Whether or not 18th-century music is easier than Rachmaninov to deal with after injury is a moot question, but there’s certainly no sign in Hayroudinoff’s playing of it of any loss of finger control or strength.

He begins with the main man himself, the Third *English Suite* proving a good showcase for precise technique, even touch, crisp articulation and crystal-clear textures with only the discreetest of pedalling, if any. If that sounds like these performances are going to be dry ones, there are in fact plenty of clever touches to pique the interest, such as the glinting antiphonal exchanges in the concerto-like Prelude or between two lines within the right hand in the Allemande, and the propelling early reiterations of the drone-bass in Gavotte II. The magnificent Sarabande is as spacious and brooding as you could want, and only in the hard percussiveness and persistent two-and-one articulation of the triplets in the Gigue do things begin to sound a little mechanistic.

Of the sons, the stars, as ever, are the two oldest, Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emanuel, and Hayroudinoff’s choices of piece here are inspired. WF steals in with a weird, chromatically twining fugue before spilling over into a skittishly virtuosic Fantasia, smashing together different styles and textures as was his wont. Hayroudinoff captures the twitchy energy and electric invention of this music, as he does in two equally changeable sonatas by CPE – one in D major whose first movement jumps around a like a cat on a hot tin roof, and one in F sharp minor whose constant exchanges of fast and slow seem to look forward to Beethoven’s Op 109. He finds a softer sound for CPE’s more introspective slow movements, but it is in the two polonaises by WF that his expressive sensitivity shines. These contemplative little poems, rich with romantic feeling, really deserve to be heard more, especially when (as these performances show) they benefit so from being performed on the piano. The sonatas by Bach’s younger sons Johann Christian and Johann Christoph Friedrich are more conventionally expansive and *galant*, yet without entirely giving up on keyboard athletics, and though Hayroudinoff sweetens his touch a little for JC, they cannot not command the same interest.

Welcome back, then, to a pianist with an eye for rewardingly unusual programming and whose fingers, thankfully, sound in excellent shape.

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Author: Lindsay Kemp



Rustem Hayroudinoff: Bach & Sons

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