

Heroes & Villas

Rachmaninov holds a special significance for pianist Alexander Melnikov – a composer whose life bore similarities to his own, as he tells **John-Pierre Joyce**

Looking out of the living room window across the shores of Lake Lucerne, surrounded by photographs of family and friends and listening to the piano reverberate from the room next door, you'd be forgiven for thinking that Sergei Rachmaninov was back at his Swiss retreat. But the pianist in the study of the Villa Senar is Alexander Melnikov who, together with soprano Julia Lezhneva, is preparing a recording of Rachmaninov's songs and the *Variations on a Theme of Chopin* for the Harmonia Mundi label.

Melnikov is only the third musician to be invited to make a recording at the villa on Rachmaninov's piano – a 1933 Steinway D model, given to the composer on his 60th birthday by the manufacturer Frederick Steinway. Back in 1998, Mikhail Pletnev recorded the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, and in 2023 Lukas Geniušas made a premiere recording of Rachmaninov's unpublished Piano Sonata No. 1. For Melnikov, the chance to play and record at the villa is a unique opportunity: 'Of course, it has its own set of challenges in terms of limited space and managing the acoustics. And my relationship with Rachmaninov is somewhat unusual because I'm not regarded as a Rachmaninov specialist. But he is very important for me. His music forms an indispensable part of my musical individuality. And this place is legendary. I remember when I was a boy, still in the Soviet Union, I read a book about Rachmaninov, and there was a photo of the villa. If somebody had told me back then that I would be here, recording on Rachmaninov's piano, I would have been shocked.'

For the recording, Melnikov has put together a programme of lesser-known Rachmaninov works. 'The case of the *Chopin Variations* is especially interesting,' he says. 'I came to learn this piece and to love it very recently. I'm fascinated by it because it's a bit out on its own. There's a view among some critics that in Rachmaninov's symphonic writing one misses the piano. I don't necessarily agree with that, but I can see what they mean. But with these *Variations* it's the other way round. There are

'To say Rachmaninov wasn't an innovator is untrue. His music is instantly recognisable'

pages and pages of music where I can see how they would be orchestrated.' The songs – which come from Rachmaninov's Opp 21, 26 and 34 sets of Romances – are likewise included because of their comparative obscurity, as well as their beauty. 'I love them,' says Melnikov. 'For me, they are on a par with Debussy's songs, and Julia Lezhneva's artistry is exactly what is needed. I think Baroque singers like Julia should perform these songs, because they require precision, intellect and good musical taste. The way she feels this music is exactly the way I do.'

The album, called *Visiting Rachmaninoff* (out now), is part of Melnikov's mission to take listeners on a deeper journey into Rachmaninov's musical world. Despite a



The Russian connection: Melnikov is recording the music of his compatriot; (opposite) Villa Senar, home of Rachmaninov



surge of interest during the 150th anniversary of the composer's birth in 2023, Melnikov feels that Rachmaninov and his music are still misunderstood. 'On the one hand he is unbelievably popular, but it's all for the wrong reasons, and I find myself in the strange situation of having to defend him. Some people say that he was not an innovator, but this is not true. Sure, he didn't write any atonal music, but there are a lot of composers today who don't write atonal music. If you have a musical language and you can instantly recognise who wrote it after just a few notes, then that is a very big achievement.'

'And for us piano players he is unlike anybody else, because you need a kind of computing power to play his music. It's highly complex and extremely difficult. Normally when a composer has a lot of notes you can kind of play them with big brushstrokes. But it's the opposite with Rachmaninov. Every note has to be played with attention, like playing Mozart. Then there are those endless, asymmetrical melodies. People love those big "tunes". There's nothing wrong with that. The same thing happened with Vivaldi, and sometimes super-popular music is also about genius. But most people don't go beyond the surface. For me it's about an incredible sense of nostalgia that constantly breaks through his music. It's an inalienable part of his musical language. As you arrive at a climax, there's already the sensation that you are leaving it behind. Every time I play with an orchestra I struggle to convey that. The more I know Rachmaninov, the more I think that the biggest mistake is to play his music with big romantic emotion, because it just kills it. Yes, he was exiled from Russia, but that's got nothing to do with it. In his First Piano Concerto, which he wrote when he was 17, there is already that sense of abandonment. That's extremely compelling.'

Although he dislikes comparisons, Melnikov's life and career have some parallels with Rachmaninov's. Both studied piano at the Moscow Conservatory, and both came from distinguished musical families. Melnikov's



Home sweet home: in Senar, 1939

Villa Senar

The house that Rach built

Situated on the northern shore of Lake Lucerne, Villa Senar stands on land bought by Rachmaninov in 1930. The hill on which it stands was flattened to create a modern home, landscaped garden and arboretum. Swiss architects Alfred Möri and Karl Friedrich Krebs were commissioned to construct a house in the functional New Objectivity style. Rachmaninov himself had a hand in the planning and design process. The villa was named after Rachmaninov and his wife by combining the first two letters of their names (Sergei and Natalia) and the R of their surname.

Rachmaninov finished his *Variations on a Theme of Corelli* at the villa in 1931 and composed his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* there in 1934. The villa hosted famous guests, whose signed photographs still adorn the walls of the study, including Noël Coward and the pianist Josef Hofmann (dedicatee of the Third Piano Concerto). Rachmaninov left the villa for the last time in August 1939, travelling to Paris and then New York. In 2000, the composer's grandson Alexandre Rachmaninov Conus set up the Rachmaninov Foundation, which today manages the villa and organises visits, concerts and masterclasses.

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Friends and colleagues: Melnikov with Isabelle Faust and Jean-Guihen Queyras in 2023; (below) Julia Lezhneva

grandmother, Zara Levina, was a noted pianist and composer. While still in Moscow, Melnikov met the great Sviatoslav Richter, who invited him to perform at music festivals in Russia and abroad. Since then, he has built up an international reputation as a soloist and as an ensemble player, often performing with long-term musical collaborators like the cellist Jean-Guihen Queyras and violinist Isabelle Faust. From 2000-02 he was a BBC New Generation Artist, and in 2018-19 he was artist-in-residence at the Wigmore Hall in London. In 2011 *BBC Music Magazine* named his recording of Shostakovich's *Preludes and Fugues* as one of the '50 Greatest Recordings of All Time'. His association with pianists Alexei Lubimov and Andreas Staier also stimulated an interest in historically-informed performance practices. At the last count, Melnikov owns six keyboards, several of which featured in his acclaimed 2023 album *Fantasie: 7 Composers, 7 Keyboards*.

The instruments, which include a pair of fortepianos from the 1790s and 1820s and an 1885 Érard model, are kept in Berlin, where Melnikov has lived for many years. The city's rich cultural life and its accessibility to concert venues across Europe and around the world make it a stimulating place to be based.

But the one place that remains off-limits – as it was for Rachmaninov – is Russia. Melnikov was one of the first Russian artists to publicly speak out against the war in Ukraine and risks possible detention if he returns. At a recital in Germany on the day Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, he told the audience: 'This morning – which I can call the worst morning of my life – I had a knot in my stomach that would prevent me from going on stage unless I can



position myself clearly in front of you. I feel responsible for this war. Neither I nor my countrymen have done enough to stop it.' Today Melnikov remains pessimistic. 'In Russia today it's very bleak. I think I will never go there again, even if everything changed.'

Looking ahead, Melnikov is preparing for another hectic round of concerts that will see him play with Cuarteto Casals, Camerata Bern and Anima Eterna, as well as with regular instrumental partners Isabelle Faust and Jean-Guihen Queyras. Planned solo recitals will feature works by Mozart, Haydn, Clementi, Liszt and Scriabin. In October this year, Melnikov and Lezhneva will tour Germany and Sweden with Rachmaninov's songs, three of his Op. 32 *Préludes* and two Op. 39 *Études-Tableaux*. In April 2026, the pair will take their programme back to where it all started: the Villa Senar.

But if it all gets too much, jokes Melnikov, he can fly off into the sunset. He already has a commercial pilot's licence and has recently trained to fly Airbus A320-type aircrafts. 'It's crazy because I'm very, very busy, and there are a lot of stress factors everywhere. But it helps me to do something completely different. It's also much simpler than music, which I like! Of course, every experience you have in your life makes its way into others, and concentration is as important for flying as it is for playing the piano – trying to make sure that you are always in front of things and not behind. And then there's risk management, because you have to take risks, and to understand what will work and what will not.' But for now, says Melnikov, a career change is not on the cards. 'To play here, on this piano, you can't really top it with anything else.' 🎹