



Transcribing Genius

Nikolai Lugansky returns to Wigmore Hall with a compelling programming featuring his transcriptions of music from Richard Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* and works by Mendelssohn and Chopin

Pianist's latest album for Harmonia Mundi, comprising pieces from *The Ring*, *Parsifal* and *Tristan und Isolde* trains the spotlight on the overwhelming passions of Wagner's music

"The most striking thing here was the variety Lugansky was able to display.... It was impossible not to delight in a performer so clearly at home in his repertoire,"
Bachtrack, review of Wigmore Hall Rachmaninov recital (22 March 2023)

Before the invention of long-playing records, piano transcriptions supplied countless music-lovers with their first experience of the works of Richard Wagner. Nikolai Lugansky, hailed by *Le Monde* as 'one of the most outstanding artists of our epoch', has revisited and enriched the genre with his take on glorious highlights from the composer's *Ring* cycle. The renowned Russian virtuoso's vision of Wagner will occupy the second half of his recital at Wigmore Hall on 8 December 2024. His choice of music marks a fascinating turn from the three all-Rachmaninov performances he gave at the venue in 2023.

Lugansky is set to open his Wigmore programme with six of Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words*, the dazzling *Spinnerlied* and Lullaby in E major among them, presented as the beguiling preface to Chopin's Third and Fourth Ballades and sublime Nocturne Op.27 No.2 in D flat major. After the interval he will perform his transcriptions of the Prologue to 'Brünnhilde and Siegfried's love duet', 'Siegfried's Rhine Journey' and 'Funeral March' and 'Brünnhilde's Immolation' from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, together with Liszt's fiendishly difficult arrangement of Isolde's *Libestod* from *Tristan und Isolde*.

"Wagner's music is exceptional," notes Nikolai Lugansky. "On the one hand, it contains very human passions; on the other, it is almost cosmic. The power and emotions of Wagner's musical language can make people quite mad! I've loved his music since I was a teenager. I started playing Wagner straight from the orchestral scores. I never wrote down those transcriptions I made when I was young and only did so after I mentioned them to my record label, Harmonia Mundi. They thought it would be a great idea for me to record them. So I suddenly had the job of putting my transcriptions on paper and choosing arrangements by others to make an album."

Lugansky's *Götterdämmerung* transcriptions occupy the centre of his latest album. *Richard Wagner – Famous Opera Scenes*, released by Harmonia Mundi on 8 March, also includes the 'Magic Fire Music' from *Die Walküre* in a sparkling arrangement by the Belgian pianist and composer Louis Brassin (1840-84), Lugansky's revision of Brassin's transcription of the 'Entry of the Gods into Valhalla' from *Das Rheingold* and a transcription by Lugansky and Zoltán Kocsis of the 'Transformation Music and Finale' from *Parsifal*. It closes with Liszt's version of the *Libestod*.

"Of course all the great composers had a combination of passion and technical mastery," observes Lugansky. "But with Wagner, I think the passion is dominant. His passion, energy and self-belief were so strong that he was able to make this unbelievable revolution from his early works, which belong to the unexceptional mainstream of German music, to a new world of spiritual and dramatic ecstasy. It's remarkable to see how he developed himself with this absolute determination and will. Among all other giants of composition, you can feel something of genius in their early works. That's not the case with Wagner! I don't feel that with his early Symphony in C, for instance, or even *Rienzi*. But everything he wrote from *Lohengrin* is a miracle. I can see no jump of this kind in any other composer."

Nikolai Lugansky's Wagner transcriptions convey the emotional intensity and ecstatic joy of pieces such as 'Brünnhilde and Siegfried's love duet' and 'Siegfried's Rhine Journey'. They often illuminate fine details, such as the piccolo part in the 'Siegfried's Funeral March', that rarely emerge from Wagner's orchestral textures. He admits that the transcription process posed a steep learning curve. "It was perhaps 30 years since I'd written any music down. After this experience, which had many difficulties, I now think differently about the greatest transcriptions by Liszt, all of Rachmaninov's and more recent ones by people like Mikhail Pletnev, Marc-André Hamelin and Zoltan Kocsis. It gave me insights into the process and opened my mind to the many different ways in which others have gone about transcribing well-known works."

Russia's long tradition of Wagner performances began in 1863 when *Lohengrin* received its national premiere at the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg. "He had such an enormous influence in Russia, even on those who hated his music and did everything they could to be different," notes Nikolai Lugansky. "Tchaikovsky tried to be objective about his work, but most other Russian musicians were either very pro or very anti. Rachmaninov, one of my favourite composers, was under the big influence of Wagner; Borodin, meanwhile, was highly critical of *Die Meistersinger* but later admired *The Ring*. Very few were neutral about Wagner. It was impossible to ignore him!"

Although Lugansky's teacher Tatiana Nikolayeva made piano transcriptions of organ pieces by Bach and Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, he does not recall Wagner being part of her repertoire. "I remember her speaking about a wonderful *Lohengrin* she'd seen somewhere in Europe, but Wagner was not really part of our discussions about music. When I was about sixteen or seventeen, I started to go abroad. It was the time of the great boom in compact discs and all the money I earned then I spent on buying CDs. One of the first I bought was an album of Wagner orchestral highlights by the Cleveland Orchestra and George Szell, another was of orchestral pieces from *The Ring* with the Vienna Philharmonic and Georg Solti. That was my introduction to Wagner and I was hooked!"

Wagner's venomous antisemitic criticism of Mendelssohn did not preclude him from incorporating quotations from his older contemporary into his operas, notably so in the Prelude to *Das Rheingold*. It is possible that he was reminded of the 'Dresden Amen', a chord sequence familiar from Protestant church services and used by Wagner to represent the Grail in *Parsifal*, thanks to Mendelssohn's quotation of it in the first movement of his 'Reformation' Symphony. Mendelssohn conducted the overture to Wagner's *Tannhäuser* in one of his concerts at Leipzig's Gewandhaus and was generous in his praise of *Der fliegende Holländer* following its first performance in Berlin in 1844. In his early career, Wagner conducted works by Mendelssohn, including the Overture *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* in Riga and the 'Scottish' Symphony in Dresden shortly after Mendelssohn's death; he also conducted a performance of the Violin Concerto in E minor in London in 1855.

"Their temperaments were so different that it would have been impossible for them to be friends," comments Nikolai Lugansky. "But it's interesting to think about how Mendelssohn would have responded to *Lohengrin* or *Tristan* if he had lived to hear them. Imagine if Mendelssohn had written operas after hearing those genius works! It's fascinating to bring Mendelssohn and Wagner together in the same recital. Of course there's no need to explain why the pianist plays Chopin. But he makes us think of the difference between music and literature. Literature thinks it can express everything; I don't think it can. Music is so much stronger at expressing what we cannot express with words, which is so clear with Chopin and Wagner. No literature, not even poetry, can express what Chopin was able to express in pieces like the Ballades or the Nocturne in D flat major."

www.nikolaylugansky.com/

For press enquiries, please contact:

Emma Curtis at Valerie Barber PR
emma@vbpr.co.uk / +44 (0)20 7586 8560
www.vbpr.co.uk

We at Valerie Barber PR are committed to protecting your personal information and so we are letting you know that we are storing your email address, work telephone numbers and work postal address on our database so that we can keep you up to date with news on our clients. You can ask us to stop using your information at any time by emailing us at info@vbpr.co.uk. You may also request access to the personal data we have about you, request that any incorrect personal data we have about you be rectified, or request that we erase your personal data. If you have any questions about how we care for and use your personal information please let us know us at info@vbpr.co.uk

Sunday 8 December 2024, 7:30pm

Wigmore Hall, London

[Event page](#)

Nikolai Lugansky piano

Mendelssohn Song without Words in E Op. 19b No. 1
Mendelssohn Song without Words in A flat Op. 38 No. 6
Mendelssohn Song without Words in C Op. 67 No. 4
Mendelssohn Song without Words in E Op. 67 No. 6
Mendelssohn Song without Words in F sharp minor Op. 67 No. 2
Mendelssohn Song without Words in D Op. 85 No. 4
Chopin Ballade No. 3 in A flat Op. 47

Chopin Nocturne in D flat Op. 27 No. 2
Chopin Ballade No. 4 in F minor Op. 52

Interval

Wagner 4 Scenes from "*Götterdämmerung*" (transcribed by Nikolai Lugansky)

Liszt Isolde's Liebestod from *Tristan und Isolde* S447 (based on Richard Wagner)