philharmonia orchestra

Nikolai Lugansky Interview

Extract from Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 2

Nikolai Lugansky

It is probably the most famous, the most popular and the most played piano concerto of all time. In 1897 he premièred his first symphony and Glazunov, a great Russian composer conducted it. It was a disaster. It was so bad for Rachmaninov that he didn't compose again for almost three years and he fell into a depression. He met a doctor whose name was Nikolai Dahl who told him he would be healthy, have force and write a new piano concerto. I don't know how much Rachmaninov paid for this doctor but the result was that he did become healthy and he started to write a second piano concerto.

Extract from Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 2

The music seems to come from the heart; from creation, but not at all from construction. But it's wonderful if you can see from the score how interesting the construction is. The bars I just played form enough material for almost one third of the concerto. This motif will open the first movement [he plays various extracts based on one motif]. Then in the reprise, the culmination of the first movement when the orchestra plays a march, the piano plays the same motif from these five notes. If you don't find these chords you cannot remark on them. Maybe this is good because the music seems as though he brought it from his heart and it immediately goes to yours, and maybe that's what is most important about this music.

Extract from Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 2

Each movement after the first begins in the same tonality. The concerto is in C minor, so the second movement starts in C minor and modulates into E major [plays extract]. This is the clarinet melody which is very popular I think. It is used in pop songs – Celine Dion sings it. It's probably used in some films: this wonderful, lyrical melody which has some adventures in the second movement [plays extract].

The finale starts in the tonality of the slow movement – E major – and immediately modulates back to C minor [plays extract]. The main theme is very energetic, and the second theme reminds me a little of the second theme of the first movement, with an even more oriental element. At the end of the finale this theme culminates in a big explosion – the most powerful orchestration of all five concerti is No. 2. The only pianist who could cut through the orchestra with his hands and his force was Rachmaninov himself.