



## Breathtaking Pianism

*MALCOLM MILLER was at  
Ian Hobson's Wigmore Hall piano recital*

A piano recital by Ian Hobson at London's Wigmore Hall on 18 April 2006 displayed his phenomenal virtuosity and orchestral approach to the instrument. British-born Hobson, who won the Leeds International Piano Competition in 1982 and has been based in the USA for some thirty years, has a predilection for virtuoso Romantic works, shown by his remarkable recordings of all the concertos by Moscheles and Rachmaninov. His choice of programme reflected this love of the virtuoso, with two large-scale sonatas, Rachmaninov's First Sonata and Liszt's B minor Sonata, both amongst the most demanding of the repertoire, and two shorter highlights: the world première of *Reflection on a Souvenir* by Roberto Sierra, and George Enescu's *Rhapsodie Romaine* No 1 in the composer's transcription, a thrilling *tour de force*.

As an opener, Haydn's *Variations in F minor* were savoured also for their pianistic felicities, the slightly fast tempo overall bringing to the fore the cadenza-like passagework and trill-filled textures of the variations with Beethovenian richness. Beethoven's debt to Haydn was also emphasised in Hobson's highly charged approach to the coda, with its string of diminished sevenths that resolve into dominant harmonies foreshadowing similar gestures in the first movement of Beethoven's *Appassionata* sonata: no wonder, as Haydn's work was composed in 1793, the very year during which Beethoven was apprentice to Haydn in Vienna.

There was a great sense of fun and exuberance to the world première of *Reflections on a Souvenir* by the Puerto Rican composer Roberto Sierra (born 1953), inspired by Gottschalk's *Souvenir de Porto Rico*, subtitled 'Marche des Gibaros' ('Procession of the Peasants'). Sierra is one of the most successful and prolific contemporary American composers, recipient of the 2003 Award in music of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and a Professor at Cornell University. His music relishes the combination of diverse elements, such as Latin American musics with contemporary *avant-*

*garde* atonality, as shown in his *Fanfares*, performed at the 2002 London Proms season. The *Reflections on a Souvenir* is a type of variation set, compelling in its originality, opening in an evocative atonal ambience, and gradually reconstructing the Puerto Rican dance theme itself as if through a textural filter, and intensifying to a climactic variation where the theme appears in ebullient, bright Latin American colours and syncopation, full of wide leaping gestures which Hobson projected with zest.

Rachmaninov and Liszt's sonatas had great spans of breathtaking pianistic pyrotechnics in which the intricate counterpoints of the textures were always absolutely clear to the ear. The Rachmaninov first sonata, less often played than the second, is based on the Faust legend with each of its three movements portraying one of the protagonists, Faust, Gretchen and Mephistopheles, with the final movement's cyclical return of the Faust and Gretchen themes proposing a programmatic *dénouement*.

Hobson presented each of the themes with crystalline clarity and character, the stark, bold fifths of the Faust movement followed by a more reflective chordal theme, tinged with the modal harmony of Russian sacred music. The propulsive waves of tension welled with incredible control, until the third, chant like theme triumphantly concluded the first movement in its brighter major mode guise. The delicate two-part voicing of the Gretchen theme was beautifully translucent, again generating a richly sumptuous Rachmaninov texture that anticipates the third concerto, while in the third movement, the jaunty cheeky devilish theme, interrupted by some caressing nocturne-like reminiscence of earlier themes, kept the music ever in motion and thrusting forward to the dramatic final bars.

This was breathtaking pianism, despite the shortcomings of the work which the composer himself noted, and which are evident in the somewhat clichéd sequential patterns, an all too clear, even naïve, symbolism, and over sectionalisation, aspects which were happily avoided in his symphonic writing and the later piano works, such as the concertos, all of which Hobson has recently recorded as both soloist and conductor.

And while there was more Rachmaninov to come in two famous Preludes as encores, there was also something of an echo of Rachmaninov in Hobson's exciting reading of the Liszt B minor sonata, projected as if he were conducting an orchestral arrangement (a feat which Hobson has in fact achieved in the USA)! There was hardly a moment to breathe in the relentless structural sweep of the piece in which contrapuntal complexities were dazzlingly projected. Rather than dwell and savour the lyrical delicacy of the slow passages, this was a performance in which suspense was sustained throughout the continual striving and transformation of themes towards a fiery finale.



Ian Hobson. Photo © 2006 Christian Steiner

Hobson's technical wizardry and immersion in the orchestral colour of the piano, however, was best matched to the final work, the *Rhapsodie Roumaine* No 1 by George Enescu in the composer's own amazing transcription, made in 1951, fifty years after the composition of the highly popular orchestral original. In this version, the brilliant instrumental colours, notably woodwind and brass and percussion, of the swirling folk dances are translated into pianistic fireworks of the most imaginative kind, especially a recurrent passage that suggested klezmer-like clarinets and shimmering strings and cimbalom, based around an unresolved dominant 7th. Hobson's leonine technique was phenomenal, completely attuned to the spirit of this work, with its sparkling rhythms and exotic harmonies, creating a spectacular effect that possibly even outdid the orchestral version in sheer exhilaration, and which offered a rare and rewarding treat in concert experience