

Arcadi VOLODOS

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Music

Arcadi Volodos at the Barbican – spellbinding, enchanting

The Russian pianist performed a programme that included Schubert, Rachmaninov and Scriabin



Arcadi Volodos © Getty

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★★★★★

The Russian pianist Arcadi Volodos appears all too infrequently in the UK, so it's hardly surprising that there was a palpable sense of anticipation even before he appeared on stage. His programme looked, on paper, out of kilter, with a preponderance of slow pieces. But any reservations were swiftly dispatched.

Volodos opened with Schubert's unassuming incomplete sonata, D157, written when he was just 18. In Volodos's hands, the first movement became by turns strongly defined and charming, while the Andante came alive through the beauty of its flowing melody, a reminder that Volodos initially trained as a singer; in the third, he brought a playfulness to its syncopation that was entirely engaging.

The six Moments musicaux were also spellbinding, with Volodos revealing previously unimagined vistas and details; even the well-known third piece came up as new, with his pedalling giving endlessly subtle colourings. Only in the sixth piece did Volodos seem too slow, though his command of the quietest dynamics was remarkable.

Volodos is still only 47, yet his patrician air as he walks on and off stage makes him appear older. The second half was dedicated to two Russian composers born only a year apart: Rachmaninov and Scriabin. He began with the youthful C sharp minor Prelude (whose success Rachmaninov grew to resent), bending it to his will with the silkiest of textures.

Flexibility and beauty of sound were the order of the day in the 10th Prelude of the Op.23 set, while he gave real character to the quirky early Serenade. Volodos's own transcription of Rachmaninov's tender Romance from his Op.21 songs was a moment of quiet beauty, while the Etude-tableau, Op.33 No.3, was brought to life with caressing lines and the most raptly hushed ending.

Volodos's propensity for myriad shades of pianissimo is perfectly suited to Scriabin; we journeyed from the relative restraint of the Op.25 No.3 Mazurka via Enigme, with its faltering grasp on tonality, to the obsession and febrile unease that marks the two pieces of Op.73. He ended with Vers la flamme — a masterpiece of colour, obsession and hypnotic power.

Volodos continued to enchant through the encores, from a Schubert minuet with his own interpolations, via Mompou, late Brahms, a serenely beautiful Vivaldi/Bach sicilienne and, to end, the B major Prelude from Scriabin's Op.2 pieces.