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Discovering Rachmaninov's First Sonata

Lukas Geniušas has made the first recording of the unpublished original version of Rachmaninov's Piano Sonata No 1. He talks to **Jeremy Nicholas** about exploring this absorbing work and the main differences between the original text and the published revision

I think the manuscript came from Rachmaninov to the library. There is no doubt that what I am playing is the first version, which he wrote in a very short amount of time. Seven days. It was

an outpouring of his creativity. It's a splendid piece of shattering might and unrestricted length. That is what is valuable about it to me.'

Lukas Geniušas is talking to me on Zoom from his home in Vilnius, where he lives with his concert pianist partner Anna Geniushene and their two infant sons. What he is revealing is fascinating information – few of even the nerdiest pianophiles will be aware of it. He has made the world premiere recording of the first version of Rachmaninov's First Piano Sonata. The manuscript has been sitting in a Moscow museum for decades but has remained unexamined by all but a handful of musicians. 'You can see on the manuscript', he continues, 'a full list of shortenings that were later applied to the published version. You can see what he threw away and what he rewrote. There are four staves – two staves are struck out and the new material was written above and below, material written at the suggestion of [the Russian pianist Konstantin] Igumnov, not of his own will.'

Born in Moscow in 1990, Lukas Geniušas graduated from the Chopin Music College in Moscow in 2008. His grandmother, Vera Gornostayeva (1929-2015), was a pupil of Heinrich Neuhaus (making Lukas a great-grand pupil of Leopold Godowsky); his father, Petras, is a Lithuanian-born pianist; his mother, Xenia Knorre, is a professor at the Moscow State Conservatory. At the age of 33, Lukas Geniušas is among the leading pianists of his generation. A serial competition entrant from 2002 onwards, he was

placed second at the 2010 Chopin Competition in Warsaw and shared second prize (with George Li) at the 2015 Moscow Tchaikovsky Competition.

So, before looking in some detail at the manuscript score, I'm curious to know how he came across this original version of Rachmaninov's Piano Sonata No 1. I've known about this first, early, unabridged version of the First Sonata since I heard about it roughly 10 years ago from colleagues, including, by the way, Daniil Trifonov, who played the Sonata in its well-known second version – or ...' (Geniušas corrects himself) 'in fact its third version, because there is another version between the first one and the one known today. It's a work that I always wanted to play [in its final version] but I never had enough time until Covid came. I had a few months off and eventually got round to learning it in 2020 and played it at quite a few concerts. But I still wanted to shed some light on this original edition, to evaluate it and see whether it was worth going for it.

'Another colleague of mine said that the manuscript might be in the National Museum of Music in Moscow. Then I discovered that there were *two* manuscripts. One of them belonged to Mr Igumnov to whom Rachmaninov dedicated the Sonata and the other one, I think, belonged to Goldenweiser. I'm not sure. But the main manuscript was in the Museum in Moscow. And it was not so very difficult to get access. A music journalist friend of mine was a friend of the Director of the Museum and he knew that I wanted to see the manuscript. It wasn't locked away or anything. Anybody could have had access to it. It's a public library! But it's puzzling that nobody had thought to ask for it before. There is a log of the names of people who had previously requested to see the manuscript. It's a small list. Perhaps they were pianists or musicologists but none of the names was familiar to me. And none of them decided it was important enough to be played, recorded and so on. Then I was in Moscow – this was before the [Ukraine] war – and I had the time and opportunity to investigate.'

In the chronology of Rachmaninov's works for piano, the Piano Sonata No 1 in D minor, Op 28, follows the Suite No 2 for two pianos (1900-01), the *Chopin Variations* (1902-03) and the Op 23 Preludes (1901-03). It was completed in 1907. That gap of four years when no piano works were forthcoming was spent composing operas (*The Miserly Knight*, *Francesca da Rimini* and *Monna Vanna*, the last one left unfinished) and his Second Symphony. It's clear that the D minor Sonata caused him a great deal of trouble, unlike the Symphony, which was written during the same period when Rachmaninov had moved with his family away from Moscow to live in Dresden in order to concentrate on composition. The initial inspiration for the Sonata was Goethe's *Faust*, its three movements intended to represent Faust, Gretchen and Mephistopheles (the inspiration for Liszt's *Faust Symphony* and almost certainly for his B minor Sonata). Although this scheme was soon abandoned, remnants of the ideas remain. Rachmaninov played an early version of the work in Dresden to Oskar von Riesemann (later the

composer's biographer) who, wrote Rachmaninov, 'doesn't seem to like it. I've begun to notice no matter what I write lately – nobody likes it. And I myself often wonder; maybe it is all nonsense.' He concludes: 'Nobody will ever play this composition. It's too difficult and long.'

En route from Paris to Ivanovka (his summer residence), Rachmaninov next played the Sonata to Medtner, Conus, Catoire and – most significantly – Konstantin Igumnov (1873-1948), a fellow pupil with Rachmaninov of Zverev and Siloti. Lukas Geniušas expands: 'There was an exchange of letters between Rachmaninov and Igumnov, where Igumnov is extremely respectful – humble, in fact – that he was able to make suggestions [to the composer]. All the suggestions were applied because, to put it very simply, Rachmaninov did not have time nor the interest: he was so taken with the orchestration of his Second Symphony. He wrote that the Sonata was "wild and interminable"! Also, it was not as well received as he had hoped. He distanced himself from the piece for the rest of his life, basically.'

'The last movement is overloaded in texture; it's immensely demanding, more than the Third Concerto'

After absorbing the comments of Igumnov, Rachmaninov trimmed his 45-minute work to one that lasted around 35 minutes. 'It was apparent', Igumnov later wrote, 'that the most essential part of my remarks had been taken into consideration by the composer. A major part of the recapitulation in the first movement had been recomposed, shortening it by more than 50 bars; some cuts had been made in the finale, mostly in the recapitulation, about 60 bars. The *Lento* was not altered.'

'This, for Rachmaninov devotees, is a familiar story,' continues Geniušas. 'Lack of conviction that he had made the right musical decision. Look at the different versions of the First and Fourth Piano Concertos (the latter exists in at least three versions, all a little bit different), the Second Sonata, and the fact that when he played his own *Corelli Variations* he would cut certain bits. In later editions [of the *Corelli*] you will read "this can be omitted" and "this can be omitted". His music requires time. That was his voice. He was tall! He was big! The known [published] version of the First Sonata is actually the third version, because before the time when he corresponded with Igumnov he had already made his own attempt to cut the piece. That manuscript I have not seen. He sent Igumnov his original version without his own cuts. So we have the original full text (which I recorded), the second slightly amended version (I don't know where the manuscript is), and the one



SYLVAIN GRIPOUX

made together with Igumnov (the known version), which incorporated 80 per cent of Igumnov's suggestions.'

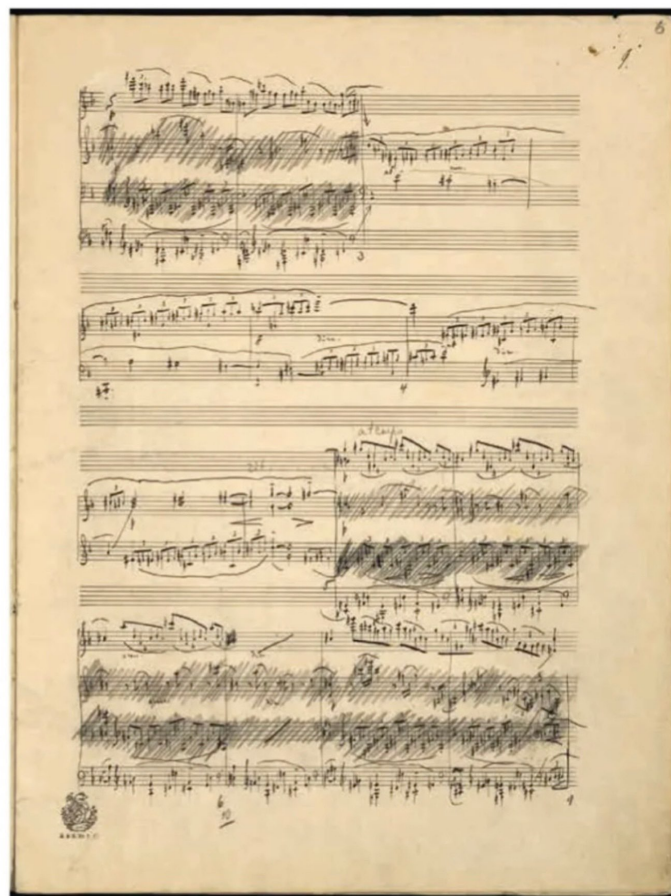
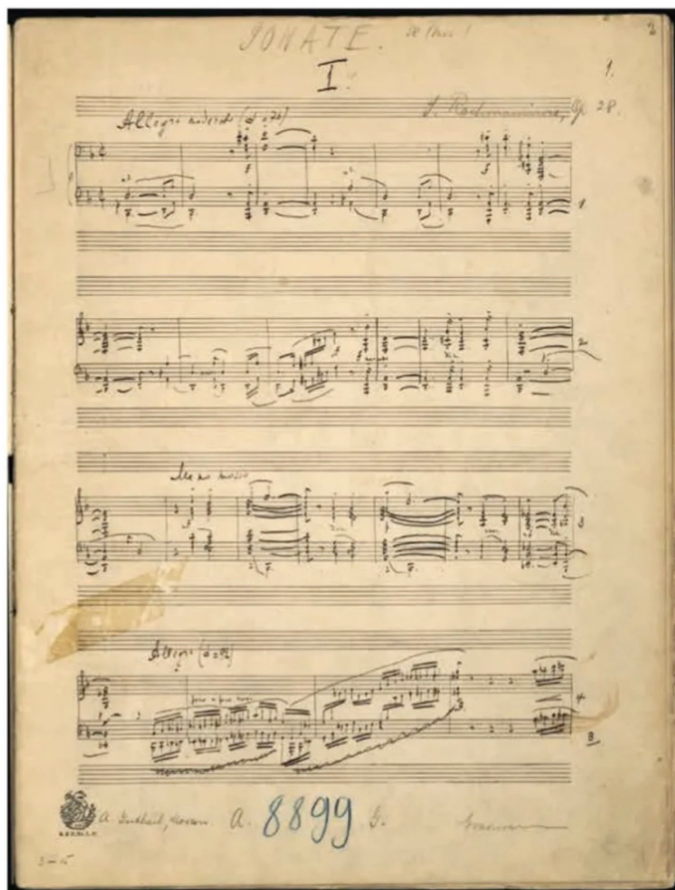
It was to Igumnov that Rachmaninov dedicated the Sonata and it was Igumnov who gave the work's premiere, in the Small Hall of the Nobility, Moscow, on 17/30 October 1908. The reception was lukewarm, the Russian critic Yuli Dengel writing in *Russkiye Vedomosti* that 'unravelling this tangle of passages, rhythms, harmonies, polyphonic twistings, is no easy matter, even for an accomplished pianist.' A later critic likened it to 'a freakish hybrid of the Second and Third Piano Concertos in which the pianist plays both the solo and orchestra parts simultaneously.'

Before Geniušas could record the original version of the First Sonata there was 'the bureaucratic hell of getting a photocopy of the manuscript – signing all the documents, the protocol, the acts and all that. It cost me maybe five or seven pounds a page, so the

cost mounted up! I must confess that [although] I play 99.8 per cent of what is in the manuscript, there are a few places where the published version is significantly better. But we can say that [this recording] is the full unabridged version.'

It may be useful to outline some of the key differences between the original version that Lukas Geniušas has recorded and the published version that everyone else records. Below are the comments that Geniušas made as we trawled through the pages of the final published version of the Sonata (the page numbers below refer to the Pavel Lamm/Konstantin Igumnov edition that was published in 1948 and is available on imslp.org) alongside the manuscript of the original. 'You know,' he said, 'I played the work 10 or 15 times before I discovered the original, so I know the differences quite well.'

*Lukas Geniušas playing
Rachmaninov's own
piano at Villa Senar*



Rachmaninov's manuscript of the First Piano Sonata – the opening page and page 9, where 'you can see what he threw away and what he rewrote'

First movement: 'The differences, some small, begin as early as page 5. Page 6, bar 2, left hand, and bar 7. (On page 7 the second subject appears, which makes the work resemble the Liszt Sonata with all those chorale moments.) Page 11 completely rewritten. Many textural differences along the way. Page 15: the left-hand triplets were originally broken quintuplets; it makes it extremely difficult to play. As a whole, that is one of the features of the original. Page 16, the modulation to F minor: instead of the quarter notes [crotchets], the original has broken eighth notes [quavers], you have two against three all the time. It's nearly unplayable because by the time you've reached here, your hands are dead already! Page 19, let's call it the reprise: at *Tempo I* he repeats all the themes from the exposition, as in a normal sonata structure, in new tonalities, but here a full three and a half minutes are thrown away. Page 21, before the A major climax of the movement (*Allegro molto*), the original has a page and a half more music in preparation, much bigger, more symphonic.

Second movement: 'This does not differ at all, except for two bars which are so strange and unclear that I decided not to use them.'

Third movement: 'Page 33, bar 3: the original has everything in triplets (as from bar 10 onwards in the final version), not two against three, which creates a very different character, and is much harder to play.

It needs real strength and resilience, and is certainly more energy-consuming! In a way, I like it. It's more tumultuous. Though to be honest, I am not a fierce advocate of this texture, and I think the revised version is a better solution, but as a matter of consistency I did not want to juggle it. Page 37, before the *meno mosso*: there are four more bars of bass As but with texture – a long breath again. The *meno mosso* is identical. Page 40: the main thing that I did *not* adopt from the original was the left hand of the theme of the *cantabile* section [in the printed edition]. It's not as beautiful. Page 47: again we have the triplet-writing as heard in the beginning. Then you have a structural difference: page 48, second system, bar 3 – there are as many as 60 bars extra in the original before he returns to the tonic minor at *meno mosso (come prima)* on page 49. All the structural differences stop there. From there it's the same to the end.'

Lukas Geniušas made this world premiere recording on Rachmaninov's piano in Villa Senar, the home he built on the shores of Lake Lucerne to remind him of his estate of Ivanovka, which the family abandoned in 1917. I was interested to hear about the state of the instrument since in 2022 the house passed from the ownership of the composer's descendants to the Canton of Lucerne. Earlier this year, to coincide with the 150th birthday of Rachmaninov, the Villa was made



SYLVAN GRIPPOX

Lukas Geniušas has restored the original version of Rachmaninov's huge First Sonata

accessible to the public. 'The piano has its problems. The treble is not as luminous as you would like it to be but there are qualities unmatched by any other piano. It's from the early 1930s – Steinway's golden age – and it's in perfect shape; it's been refurbished. It's something to do with the body of the instrument, but somehow the sound lasts longer there. I spoke to the tuner who has looked after the piano for 20 years. There's an enormously rich middle and bass register which is very powerful.'

And the recording? 'Some things in the finale I was able to play quicker than I would have done live, simply because the process allows you to repeat things and do them better. Honestly, the original of the Sonata is not the best version. For me, the first edition is valuable and goes to my heart mainly because of the first movement. I thought about making a version that combined the best of both versions, as has been done with the Second Sonata, but in my opinion it is too long. I think, humbly,

that it is going to be good in the recording but, frankly, I never managed to play it as well as I wanted in concert. The last movement is overloaded in texture – and volume. The sonority is just very loud all the way! It's immensely demanding, more than the Third Concerto really. On the other hand, I'm still not convinced by all the changes in the printed version.'

And the fate of the manuscript – now inaccessible, presumably, to anyone from the West while the war with Ukraine continues. 'The manuscript was taken out of the archive so that a new critical edition could be made. Four volumes of Rachmaninov's works were supposed to be published for the 150th anniversary in Moscow but they won't be, as I understand it, because the main musicologist died and the project stopped.' **IP**

Lukas Geniušas's recording of the original version of Rachmaninov's Piano Sonata No 1 will be released by Alpha on 20 October and will be reviewed next issue