Sergei Vasilievich Rachmaninoff and Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin are, together with Franz Liszt, probably the most famous examples of that double genius of virtuoso pianist and composer, whereby Franz Liszt and Sergei Rachmaninoff also achieved extraordinary success as conductors. One only has to think of the first performance of Wagner’s "Lohengrin" in Weimar in 1850 or Rachmaninoff’s exemplary interpretation of Tchaikovsky’s 5th Symphony, about which Nikolai Medtner noted, “… until then... we only knew the version by Nikisch’s and his imitators. His miserably slow tempi became the norm for Tchaikovsky performances, enforced by conductors who followed him blindly. Under Rachmaninoff this tradition was suddenly broken and we heard the composition as if for the first time; most remarkable was the cataclysmic ferocity of the finale, quite the opposite of Nikisch’s pathos, which had always spoilt this movement.” These words give us some idea about how stirring Rachmaninoff must have been as a performer, and not just as a pianist.

His compositional works were met with great antagonism. He must have found cutting and cynical remarks by prominent colleagues as especially hurtful. Richard Strauss delivered the infamous judgement, "sentimental sewage", about Rachmaninoff’s oeuvre. And George Szell’s legendary dry humour “shot” some very pointed arrows after a performance of the 3rd Piano Concerto in “So many notes..?...But why?”

Many prejudices which, even today, hinder a completely unbiased appraisal of Rachmaninoff’s works, can be found in the rapid development of central-European music from the late romantic right up to the radically implemented dissolution of conventional tonality. The leading figure in all of this was undoubtedly Arnold Schönberg. In his works we can follow, in almost textbook fashion, the change from late romantic chromatics to the twelve-ton technique which he developed. In my opinion, even nowadays, the varied palette of compositions from the 20th century is much too often judged one-sidedly by the constructivism and strong formal principles of the so-called “Second Viennese School”. Such differing talents as Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Charles Ives, Franz Schreker, Alexander Scriabin and also Sergei Rachmaninoff cannot be judged fairly in this way.
Both Scriabin and Rachmaninoff can be found in the line of tradition between Moscow (Tchaikovsky) and St. Petersburg ("The Five": Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Balakirev, Borodin and Cui) on the one side, and the classical Russian "modern" with its protagonists Prokofiev, Shostakovich and of course Stravinsky on the other. This place in music history becomes apparent when we take a closer look at the early works.

In Rachmaninoff’s first Piano Concerto in F# minor and Scriabin’s first and only contribution to this genre, which by the way is also in F# minor, there is a common “base” of expression between the piano solo and the orchestra, which is undeniably orientated on Tchaikovsky. This seems to me to be most apparent in a comparison of the development passage of Rachmaninoff’s C minor Concerto (Rachmaninoff, 2nd Piano Concerto, C minor, opus 18, eight bars from 10, Boosey&Hawkes) with Tchaikovsky’s B minor Concerto (Tchaikovsky, 1st Piano Concerto, B minor, opus 23, 1st movement, bars 240 - 250). It becomes clear that the motoric character of this passage represents a conservation and further development of a virtuoso style, which forms a direct line to the later crystal-clear brilliance and aggressive rhythms of Serge Prokofiev and Dimitri Shostakovich.

Whereas Rachmaninoff remained true to his classical form principles until his death, Scriabin created an "individual cosmos" in his later works by breaking and disposing with the principle of tonal triads with major and minor, and by structuring chords based on fourths and fifths, inspired by mystical-philosophical ideas. His turning to an almost religious mysticism leads one to rather forget the common musical roots of the two composers. Scriabin’s increasing megalomania and his dream of an “opus summum” – an orchestral work with an enormous orchestral setting, which was also to include colours, smells, gestures, architectural elements and the completely enigmatic “participation of nature”, which was to take place in a temple in India (which was never built) – differentiate him, in the end, from his earlier fellow student Rachmaninoff.

For almost 20 years I have been fascinated by the similarities and differences in the life and work of these two musicians. The Rachmaninoff cycle with the Stuttgart
Philharmoniker in the 2005/06 season and the resultant preoccupation with this music offered a welcome opportunity to unite two master works by Rachmaninoff with Scriabin’s last opus on one CD.

**Der Fels** (The Rock) is the first large-scale orchestral work by the then 19 year old Sergei Rachmaninoff. Emboldened by the Gold Medal which his final composition for the composition class of the Moscow Conservatory had received (the opera “Aleko”), this piece is a very self-confident and distinctive symphonic poem. Even Peter Illyich Tchaikovsky, who regarded Rachmaninoff as his legitimate successor, thought so highly of the work that he considered performing it in the Winter season 1893/1894. However, his unexpected death hindered this. This performance might perhaps have given the tone poem a greater degree of popularity, as it is hardly known by the general public to this day.

I am particularly fascinated by the instinctive mastery of the orchestral setting, as “Der Fels” is remarkably instrumented. For example, we find a passage in the strings which reminds us of Wagner’s “Feuerzeuber” from “Die Walküre” (12 bars after O and following in the score Rob. Forberg Edition) and the 1st Horn is treated almost as a soloist. Also worthy of note is the dual literary source. In the first edition of the score (1894) the first lines of the poem “Der Fels” by Michael Lermontov (1814-1841) were included:

The golden cloud slept through the night
Upon the breast of the giant rock,
Floated happily away early in the morning
Across the sea to the blue faraway sky.

But a sheen of it remained
In the ruts of the rock, moist as the tears,
Which the old one, now alone, full of longing
Is crying for those who the wind has blown away.
In 1898 the author Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) received an example of the score with a handwritten note by the composer. “To my dear and highly esteemed Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, the author of the story ‘On the Road’ which serves as the programmatic basis of this composition.” In the story a middle aged man meets a young woman whom he, the “unrequited one”, tells about his love and his search for happiness and success. Like the cloud which drifts away on the wind next morning, the woman also has to go on her way.

The dramatic composition wonderfully shows the listener in his mind’s eye, the irreconcilability of the literary protagonists. A dark theme in the Cellos and Double Basses seems to represent the rock (or the man); a delicately playful motive in the Flute and Clarinet is the cloud (or the woman). The first theme climaxes in an forceful eruption (4 bars before U in the score Rob. Forberg), which exemplifies Rachmaninoff’s efforts to give each of his musical works only one climax - “the point” as he called it – and the whole work must relate to this one point. The tone poem ends with a peaceful swan song in the brass, which is reminiscent of a funeral march.

It was not literature, but a painting which inspired Sergei Rachmaninoff to his third large work which he composed together with his 2nd Symphony and the first Piano Sonata during his three year stay in Dresden: The Isle of the Dead by Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901). The allegoric paintings by the Swiss symbolist were extremely popular at the turn of the century. There was a print of one in almost every household which aspired to being artistically “a la mode”. While Böcklin’s antithesis of this theme, the painting “The Isle of the Living” from the year 1888 had not attracted much attention, “The Isle of the Dead” had art lovers almost addicted to it. It was understood as a metaphor for loneliness and the loss of individuality in a world which was becoming increasingly industrialised, an representation of the Fin de Siècle. This morbid inclination was aptly characterised by Thomas Mann as “sympathy with death”.

Even today, the painting (which Böcklin produced in several versions) exerts a powerful fascination: a wide expanse of water, over which a rowing boat is floating. One can only see the back of the rower as well as a figure clothed in white which is standing in the boat. In the boat there is a covered coffin and into the view of the passengers in
the boat loom the tall cliffs of the island. The symbolic content of this scene inspired
the French director Patrice Chereau almost a hundred years later in his conception for
his “Ring of the Century” in 1976 in Bayreuth.

Rachmaninoff increases the ghostly atmosphere with his typical use of the “Dies irae”,
that stark melody from the catholic funeral liturgy which can be found in almost all his
works. 232 bars in 5/8 time rock the boat on its journey to the island and evoke an
almost hypnotic effect through their oppressive monotony and the slowly ever-increasing
tension. I have always found it a great challenge to take the “lento” at the start of
the score literally and to start so slowly that it is just possible to beat twice each bar
(2+3 quavers or 3+2 quavers). This peacefulness which Rachmaninoff has expressed
so musically is then in sharp contrast to the lyrical middle part in ¾ time (“... until now
death has reigned, from here on life rules...”), which according to his own instructions
is to be played much “..quicker and emotionally...”. The exalted upsurge (from figure
16 in the Boosey & Hawkes score) and the musical interpretation of death throes (fig-
ure 22 B&H) with its complicated chromatics, is, in my opinion, modern music which
had never before been heard in the year 1909. With the “Dies irae” (see above) played
by the 2nd Violins and the 1st Clarinet, we return unmistakeably to other-worldly
spheres. The last bars of the piece are once again in the peaceful 5/8 and a bleak,
sparsely instrumented A minor chord closes the sombre work

When Scriabin wrote Prométhée (1908-1910), he was filled with the idea of a “mysti-
cal chord“, which was made up of the notes B-F#-C#-A-D#-G (these notes are written
at the start of the work in a downward movement). This “mystical chord” can be trans-
posed to all 12 semitones of the chromatic scale without losing any of its impact in the
harmonic constellation. Scriabin used his notes as a chord and as a scale. Thus he
developed, from his “mystical chord”, which does not at all try to resolve itself into con-
ventional harmonies, all the successive and simultaneous structures of the composi-
tion, whether they be melodic-thematic, harmonic or polyphonic. The integration of the
horizontal and the vertical into a sort of “sound centre” (a fitting description which was
The complicated interval in combination with the innovative instrumentation of 5 Flutes, 3 Oboes and Cor Anglais, 4 Clarinets, 4 Bassoons, 8 Horns, 5 Trumpets, 3 Trombones and Tuba, numerous percussion instruments, solo Piano, large 4-part choir and strings bring the listener to the edge of his perception. However, the organisation of all the notes and the structures from a “sound centre” and the formal arrangement of the compositional parts, which are in strict proportional relationship to one another, give the music a completely unified character.

This unity corresponds to his philosophic-mystical world of ideas which it is supposed to express. An idea which is ever-present in all of his tone poems is the progressive movement from “chaos” through the “descent of the spirit into the material” and the “re-ascent from the deepest depths of the material”, right up to “dematerialisation”. For the most part Prométhée follows this movement.

“These ideas are my concept, and they mark the composition just as they do the sounds... Every creation presupposes a plan and a thought.”

Gabriel Feltz

Translation David Boyd

Gabriel Feltz was born in Berlin in 1971 and has been head conductor of the Stuttgart Philharmonic and Generalmusikdirektor of the City of Stuttgart since 2004. From 2001 to 2005 he was Generalmusikdirektor of the Philharmonic Orchestra of the theatre Altenburg-Gera.

In 1994 he completed his studies in conducting and piano at the “Hanns Eisler” Hochschule für Musik in Berlin. Following this he became Gerd Albrecht’s assistant at the Staatsoper in Hamburg. First engagements took him to the Städtischen Bühnen in Lübeck (1995-1997) and then to the theatre in Bremen (1997-2000).

1993 he won a 1st prize at the 4th Berlin Conducting Course of the Ferenc-Friscay-Gesellschaft. 1996 he was chosen to be one of two “Conducting Fellows” at the Tanglewood Music Center and conducted concerts there together with Seiji Ozawa and