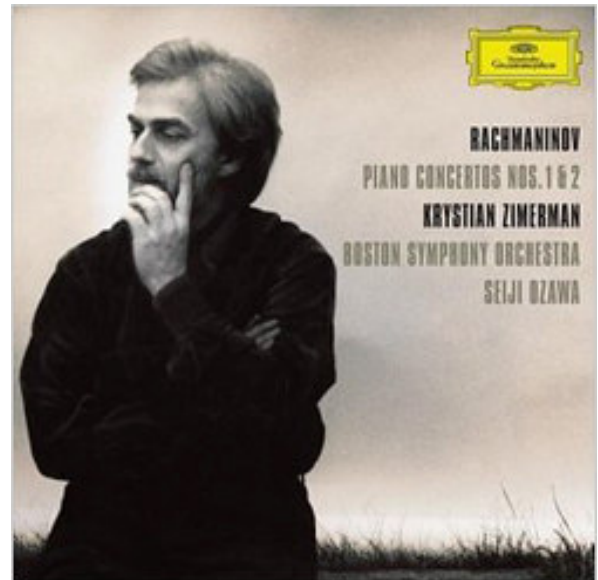




Krystian Zimerman and BSO Rachmaninov Piano Concertos

Pianist Krystian Zimerman is renowned for his exacting artistic standards and uncompromising approach to performance; The Guardian commented recently that “(His) recital at the Festival Hall in June was final proof, if it were still needed, that Zimerman merits a place among the greatest pianists of all time.” This month, DG releases Rachmaninov: Piano Concertos Nos. 1 & 2, Zimerman's first new CD since his recording of the Chopin concertos was released in 1999. He is accompanied by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, directed by Maestro Seiji Ozawa. This interview by Jessica Duchon accompanies the CD.



Jessica Duchon: When did you first play these concertos?

Krystian Zimerman: I first learned them when I was 15 or 16, studying at the music school in Katowice. The Second Concerto was one of the first concertos I ever played with an orchestra, while the First was among the works I did for my diploma when I finished my studies in 1977. It was also Rachmaninov's own diploma piece. I felt I had a very personal relationship with it.

While I was at school, I nearly had the chance to play the Second Concerto at the BBC Promenade Concerts in London. We had an excellent school orchestra, which in 1974 made its first trip out of Poland to a festival of youth orchestras in Denmark - I was chosen to be the soloist. Over 100 groups from around the world were there, and we were thrilled to be awarded first prize. A BBC VIP from London was in the audience, and he arranged for us to be invited to the Proms the following summer. The idea was to play the Rachmaninov Second Concerto and I was again invited to be the soloist. But by February it turned out that I had qualified to take part in the Chopin Competition in Warsaw. The Prom was in August, the competition was in September, and I felt I couldn't do both. It was a painful decision, but I knew that the competition could ultimately be more important. Unfortunately, the school had to send a tape to the BBC to qualify for the Prom. The tape had already been recorded, so the only thing we could do at such short notice was to pretend that the proposed soloist had

played it. So today, somewhere in the bowels of the BBC, there may be an unidentified tape from 1974 of me playing the Rachmaninov Second Concerto!

Were you influenced by Rachmaninov's own recordings?

I adore Rachmaninov as a pianist as well as a composer. His recording of the First Concerto is absolute genius - he said everything there is to be said about this work. His recording of the Second Concerto, however, has always been an enigma to me: I feel that this performance doesn't really explain what is inside this music. When I worked with Lutoslawski on his piano concerto, I remember him telling me that when he conducted his own pieces he felt that the one thing he could never dare to say to the orchestra was "Play it more beautifully because it's a fantastic piece!" So I wonder if in this recording Rachmaninov was maybe afraid of his own feelings, afraid to interpret it in a way that is truly touching, in case it sounds self-indulgent - I don't know how far it represents his real feelings about the work. I was looking for clues to the piece and went to Philadelphia to see the original score, and I found that it included pencil marks from Rachmaninov showing where you should really let go and knock yourself out!

Your performances of the concertos are white-hot. What are their key emotional elements for you?

You don't play the Rachmaninov concertos; you live them. For me, these are young concertos for young pianists: full of sturm und drang, full of the emotions you feel the first time you are in love. I thought about how I would feel if I'd written a piece like the Second Concerto - there are some intensely touching moments and the melodic parts say so much about the composer that you would feel almost naked. Control is one thing I am not searching for in this piece . . .

Will you play or record the Third and Fourth Concertos as well?

I'm not so much in favor of complete recordings, and the four Rachmaninov concertos were never intended to be a cycle. I have great respect for No. 3, and at the moment I don't feel ready to put my thoughts about it into a recording. I feel the interpretation would be enormously complex to work out - it's so laden with emotion that it tears me to pieces every time I hear it. As I said, you don't play Rachmaninov concertos, you live them; and this one could almost be life-threatening . . .

You recorded the First Concerto in 1997 and the Second in 2000 — why did you choose these pieces at this time?

Actually, these recordings have been in my contract with Deutsche Grammophon since 1976! It's what you could call a long-term project . . .

What do you enjoy about working with Seiji Ozawa?

My collaboration with Ozawa has been 25 years long and I respect him tremendously as a musician. He's a great human being to work with: he's open to every idea. We often have many different ideas about an interpretation, but it's always easy to reach a mutual ground. I first played with him in 1978; in 1982 we worked together with the Berlin Philharmonic, celebrating its centenary; and he has invited me to Boston and other places to play concertos as well as recording the Liszt concertos together for Deutsche Grammophon. I particularly enjoyed playing Brahms's Second Concerto with him - that was an unforgettable experience.

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