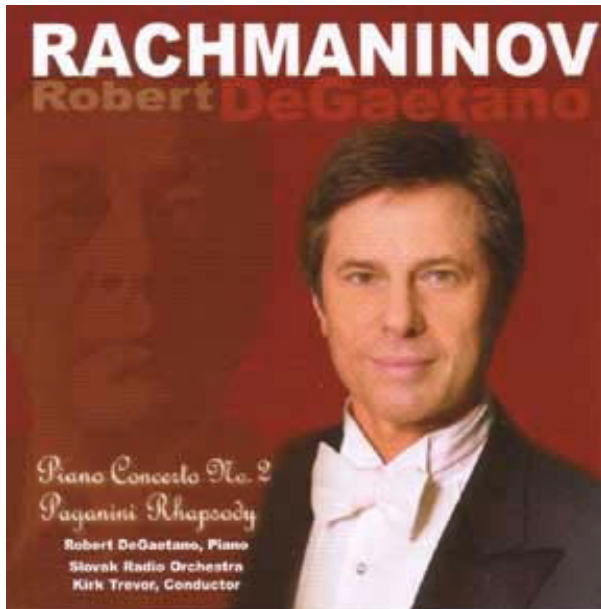


Fresh beauty of Rachmaninov



By Phil Muse

At some point a few years ago, Juilliard graduate Robert DeGaetano got tired of waiting for "the star making machinery behind the popular song" (as much a part of the classical scene as it is the pop/rock) and started his own recording label. This is the pianist's fifth release for Crystonyx Productions, and it's a beauty. More than anything, what grabs you about these recordings of Rachmaninov's **Piano Concerto No. 2** and **Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini** are their freshness. You can feel it after having heard, as I have, too many tiresome pairings on big-time labels of these familiar works in which producer and pianist were evidently bent on an impossible ideal of note-perfection, while the orchestra played as if they'd punched in to work that day, saw the notice on the bulletin board, and groaned, "Oh God, we're down for Rach 2 plus Pag, again!"

Not in this recording. I won't trade on a hoary cliché by saying "It was like hearing it for the first time." Really, it was more like the warm pleasure that comes of renewing the

acquaintance of old friends that one has regrettably allowed to lapse. From the series of portentous chords in the piano at the opening to the thumping cadence for soloist and orchestra at the very end, this Rachmaninov Second will hold your attention to the very end. The slow movement, *Adagio sostenuto*, the loveliest of moonlit nocturnes (Okay, so that's redundant), reminded me of pleasure that I haven't experienced in recordings of this movement since several that Leonard Pennario made for Capitol long, long ago when the world was a better place.

The Paganini Rhapsody benefits from superb timing and a wonderful feeling for the shape and contour of the music and its melodies by DeGaetano and the ensemble, the Slovak Radio Orchestra under the baton of Kirk Trevor. This work reveals most clearly the point to which the composer has carefully built his harmonic structure. It is, of course, the famous 18th Variation, which slips in so unobtrusively in this performance it's as if you have been preoccupied with something else, then turned around suddenly to look deep into the eyes of an incredibly beautiful girl that you instantly feel you've known all your life.

Rachmaninov has prepared us for this moment with the rising tumult in the orchestra in Variations XIII through XIV, the falling away of the tension in the quiet piano arpeggios in XV, the mysterious dialog of piano and oboe in XVI and a beautiful horn melody against a backdrop of quiet strings, and then the scalar passage in the piano against long-drawn sighs in the winds in XVII. After Variation XVIII, the sudden change in intensity in XIX lets us know we're on the way to the eventful end of our cruise!

So, you need to have this recording, even if you have plenty of other Rach 2's and Pags on your music shelf. It will restore your faith in Rachmaninov. If you can't find it at your record shop, you can contact the artist's website at www.degaetano.com.