

# Interview with Evgeny Kissin

by *Dmitry Rachmanov*

Dmitry Rachmanov, who teaches at Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University, recently had an all-Scriabin CD released by the British label Master Musicians (also Rachmaninoff 24 Preludes), and that his all-Tchaikovsky album is to be released in Moscow by Vista Vera. Dmitry has played in Croatia, Austria and Germany in August. (*Interview was conducted in Russian.*)

I recently saw Evgeny Kissin when he came to Chicago to perform the five Beethoven Concerti with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under Sir Andrew Davis in late October, 2005. I then caught up with him in Paris, where he was staying on November 8, 2005, to talk about Scriabin and what Scriabin's music means to him. Kissin was busy working on his new solo program of works by Beethoven and Chopin which he was to perform in Baden Baden, Germany on November 26. The concert was organized in conjunction with the Herbert von Karajan prize which was to be awarded to Mr. Kissin on the occasion.

*Dmitry Rachmanov* What are your first recollections of Scriabin's music?

*Evgeny Kissin* The first Scriabin work I have ever performed in concert was the e minor Mazurka, Op. 25, No. 3. I played it for an encore after the very first solo recital in my life when I was eleven years old. There were also some Scriabin works which I worked on as a student early on, but which never reached a performing stage: some of the earlier preludes from Opus 11, and the second sonata, which I worked on some twenty years ago... But I did play the c-sharp minor Etude, Op. 42, No. 5 a lot in those days, to give you one example. Also, during my school years I played the Four Pieces Opus 51 (Fragilité, Prelude, Poème Ailé and Dance Languide). I haven't listened to my recordings of those performances for a long time, even though I am sure that after so many years I would play those pieces better now. To fully understand and feel the images expressed in those pieces—fragility, languor, winged elation—you need to reach a certain age.

*DR.* Now that you feel more mature to play Scriabin's music, what place do his works occupy in your repertoire?

*EK.* As far as the number of works, there are fewer Scriabin compositions that I play now than I hope to do in the future. There are many works there that I haven't played yet which I would like to include at some point in my repertoire – if not all then most of the preludes and certainly the first and the second sonatas...

*DR.* Even the first sonata?

*EK.* I like the first sonata very much! The later sonatas, starting with the fourth, I don't feel as much affinity to. This is not a question of my appraisal of those works. I like to listen

to all of them. Rather it is a question of what I feel closer to as a musician and what I could be more successful with as a performer. I do like very much the Waltz in A-Flat, Opus 38 and the b minor Fantasy, Opus 28, which almost no one plays, and many of the mazurkas.

*DR.* I like what Henrich Neuhaus said about Scriabin: “*The Poem of Ecstasy* is what I would call Scriabin’s entire creative and personal journey. He burned and was consumed. That is why his music—like a star, like the Sun—radiates light.” Given this Scriabin imagery, the special agogic flexibility, individual touch, colors, feelings of languor, sensuality, expression of will power, ecstasy, etc., what sort of expressive problems does one encounter in playing this music which are unique to this composer?

*EK.* Neuhaus’s words could probably be applied to any great artist but they are particularly appropriate in the case of Scriabin! I think that Scriabin’s music is so special and so different from anything else that in order to be able to play it successfully, in order to fully integrate all the interpretive issues inherent in that style, one has to have a certain type of talent, a certain predilection for this music. It cannot be simply taught!

*DR.* Could you name a few performers whom you heard either live or on records who “introduced” you to the inner world of Scriabin’s music?

*EK.* As a child I listened a lot to Vladimir Sofronitsky’s recordings. Then I heard the wonderful recordings of Samuel Feinberg. I also listened to a recording of the third sonata by Samson François. As far as Scriabin’s orchestral works, I have to mention two Russian conductors who made wonderful recordings of his symphonies: Nikolai Golovanov and Evgeny Svetlanov.

*DR.* Have you heard Glenn Gould’s recording of the Third Sonata?

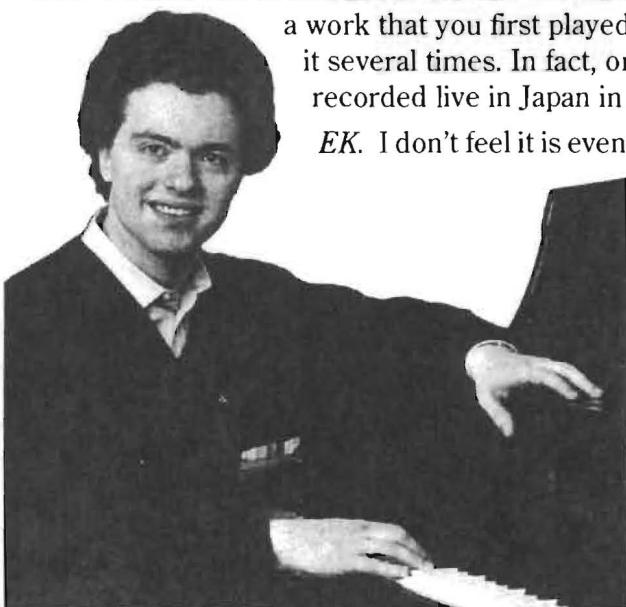
*EK.* No, I did not even know of its existence! I believe that, apart from François, I have heard three Sofronitsky recordings of the sonata and also the recordings of Emil Gilels and Yakov Flier.

*DR.* I would like to talk about the Third Sonata which you recently recorded. This is a work that you first played at the age of sixteen, coming back to it several times. In fact, one of your first performances of it was recorded live in Japan in 1988.

*EK.* I don’t feel it is even worth listening to that recording now.

That was my very first public performance of that sonata. Then I returned to it in 1999, but even then I did not feel that my performance of it was entirely successful. I think that I only succeeded in playing it really well only recently. I feel that the recording of the sonata which I made last year, and which has just been released, turned out well.  
*[RCA - 82876-65389-2(CD), 9/20/2005]*

*DR.* What were the main interpretive issues of that sonata you felt presented particular challenges?



*Evgeny Kissin*

*Photo by Roger Mastroianni*

*EK.* The first movement presented some problems. It is a very short movement—only six minutes long—in which every note and every sound are extremely meaningful. One can say about Scriabin in general that he is not very wordy in his utterings, but every sound in his music is very valuable. And to find the correct means of expression, the right kind of gesture, rubato, etc., which would truly correspond to every moment, phrase or line of that movement, was not easy, and it took years to accomplish.

*DR.* Yes, in comparing your recent recording of the sonata with the early one, one can sense that even in 1988 you had a true intuitive and emotional affinity to the music. But then there was more raw emotion and forcefulness in your approach. Now your playing is more tempered and suave, yet you have not lost any passion and sense of spontaneity which you had before. If you compare the timings of the movements, for example, the first movement is 5'55" in 1988 versus 6'13" in 2004, but the most telling is the third movement, 4'29" vs. 5'39" – a full minute and ten seconds longer!

*EK.* Of course, I wasn't able to do then what I am capable of doing now. I can tell you that during the recording sessions which took place in August of 2004, it so happened that a couple of times, after listening back to full takes of the third movement, I kept thinking to myself that maybe I ought to play this music slower so that there would more inner intensity to it and I could say more with it in a more fulfilling way – which I did in the successive takes. But you are absolutely right. I always felt the emotional closeness to this music since my childhood, to the third sonata in particular. But having an emotional bondage with the music is not enough for its successful performance. Despite the tremendous burning intensity which this music exudes, to play it simply with drive and stress is not appropriate. To achieve the expression of the burning passion without pushing, combining the emotional drama with the great subtlety, that was not easy to achieve at all! It is especially true for the first movement of the sonata, the last movement of which is somewhat different and more one-dimensional. There, with the exception of the second subject, one can pull it off by simply showing off one's temperament – which isn't enough to do justice to the finale either, but it is more appropriate there than in the first movement.

*DR.* Do you have any plans to include the music of Scriabin in your repertoire during the next few years?

*EK.* I do not plan my repertoire so far ahead. Also, you see, many Russian performers who come to the west exclusively offer the Russian fare in their concerts. But in order to achieve a true status as a performer, one also has to show that you can play the western European music as well. My own tastes are rather wide. My repertoire comprises a variety of composers and Russian music does not necessarily play a central role in it. It is very close to me, of course, but I feel just as close to the music of European composers. I have to say though that Scriabin is the least Russian among the Russian composers. You won't find any Russian folk elements there. And, as I said before, there are a lot of Scriabin's works which I haven't played yet and which I would very much like to learn in the future.

*DR.* Thank you very much for talking to me and for sharing your thoughts on Scriabin with the readers of the Scriabin Society Journal. Good luck in your future endeavors and congratulations on the upcoming Karajan Prize!

*EK.* Thank you and all the best to you too!