

Kempff and the St Petersburg Phil bring a 'dream' piece to Scotland



David Kettle

Pianist Freddy Kempff is skiing in the Alps when we speak in the run-up to Christmas. "We went out yesterday, and I'm going to take my two older children skiing later. Do you have any snow up there in Scotland?" he enquires. Well, not much – although there should be by the time he arrives tomorrow, for his Usher Hall concert with the St Petersburg Philharmonic under Vassily Sinaisky, standing in for an indisposed Yuri Temirkanov.

Kempff is very much an international figure: born in London to German and Japanese parents, he's now resident in Germany, performs widely across the world, and is a fluent speaker of several languages, one of which is Russian – though that's perhaps not too surprising, given his enormous popularity there and his strong links with the country. Winner of the 1992 BBC Young Musician of the Year contest, Kempff looked set to follow it up with triumph at the 1998 Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, where he was the clear favourite with the audience and critics.

In the end, he came third, and the resulting outrage – as well as claims of favouritism from certain judges towards their former pupils – took him deep into the hearts of the Russian listeners. He's on familiar territory, then, in his Usher Hall performance, playing Rachmaninov's much-loved Second Piano Concerto alongside his all-Russian co-performers, the second stop in the St Petersburg Philharmonic's seven-concert UK tour.

How does Kempff feel his familiarity with the country informs his understanding of Russian music? "I was only exposed to Russia after the Tchaikovsky Competition," he explains. "But it was a real eye-opener to be able to go there. I've sat on a train that didn't stop for two days, and still hadn't travelled very far across the country. You'd travel from one side of Europe to the other in that time. It brings it home to you how vast the country is. Or just walking outside when it's -40C and experiencing how



Freddy Kempff will play Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto at the Usher Hall

difficult and severe life can be there. It gets you closer to understanding the whole Russian mentality."

Kempff has a long and intimate relationship with Rachmaninov, too. It was with his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* that Kempff won the BBC Young Musician competition, and he's been playing the Second Piano Concerto since he was a teenager. "When I was growing up, that was the piece I dreamt of performing

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as an adult. There are certain bits in the Concerto that I very clearly remember as a child." His earliest performance sticks particularly in his mind. "I played it when I was 14. It was at school, St Edmund's near Canturbury, but not with the school orchestra, and our school music director was conducting, with my French teacher on bass drum. I'll always remember that. I thought he was quite good at it, actually."

Does he feel the weight of listener expectations when he performs such a well-known and well-loved piece? "I wouldn't say so, no. In fact, I've found with any work that's extremely well-

known, when you come back to it you realise that's because it's so powerful. It's not for any other reason – it's simply because the music is so good."

He thinks the Concerto has particular challenges. "Of all four Rachmaninov concertos, this is one of the trickier ones in concert. It's perhaps not the toughest solo part to learn, but there are lots of things that could potentially go wrong in concert. It uses a big orchestra, and there are moments when it stops and starts very suddenly, which is dangerous when you have such a big band – things can easily get out of sync."

But it's this connection with other musicians that Kempff seems to particularly relish. "Being a pianist, you're often quite isolated in what you do. You often play in solo recitals, but on a tour you build up relationships with the orchestra, the tour managers, the stage crew. You feel a real sense of being part of a team. Even if it can be a challenge finding time for the things you'd normally do – like sleep, or eating properly, or exercise."

And with this talk of fitness, it's time for Kempff to head back to the pistes. ■

Freddy Kempff plays Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto with the St Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra at the Usher Hall, Edinburgh, tomorrow