

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Born 1 April 1873 in Oneg (near Novgorod), Russia; died 28 March 1943 in Beverly Hills, California.

Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Opus 27 (1906-1907)

PREMIERE OF WORK: St. Petersburg, 26 January 1908; Sergei Rachmaninoff, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 22 January 1943; Syria Mosque; Vladimir Bakaleinikoff, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 43 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings.

How much Rachmaninoff's life changed in those half dozen years! The premiere of his First Symphony in 1897 was a complete failure, a total fiasco. The Russian nationalist composer César Cui ranted, "If there is a conservatory competition in Hell, Rachmaninoff would gain first prize for this Symphony." Rimsky-Korsakov did not find it "at all agreeable." Young Rachmaninoff — aged 24 — was plunged into a Stygian despair. For over two years, he entertained the darkest thoughts and composed nothing. Then in 1900, he began consulting one Dr. Nicholas Dahl, a physician specializing in the treatment of alcoholism through hypnosis. Dahl's method of auto-suggestion (as well as his enlightened conversation about music) restored the composer's confidence and desire to work. Within a year, the grand Second Concerto was produced and successfully launched into the world, and Rachmaninoff was on his way to international fame. By 1905, he was one of the most important figures in Russian music.

In addition to his prodigious talents as pianist and composer, Rachmaninoff was also a first-rate conductor, and when his stock began rising after the Second Concerto carried his name into important Russian musical circles, he was appointed opera conductor at the Moscow Imperial Grand Theater. As with his music, he found excellent success with his conducting, but he had understandable misgivings about the way it interfered with his creative ambitions. In an interview with Frederick H. Martens, he said, "When I am concertizing I cannot compose. When I feel like writing music I have to concentrate on that — I cannot touch the piano. When I am conducting I can neither compose nor play concerts. Other musicians may be more fortunate in this respect; but I have to concentrate on any one thing I am doing to such a degree that it does not seem to allow me to take up anything else." There was much music in him that needed to be written, and he knew that a choice about the direction of his future work was imminent.

By the beginning of 1906, he had decided to sweep away the rapidly accumulating obligations of conducting, concertizing and socializing that cluttered his life in Moscow in order to find some quiet place in which to compose. His determination may have been strengthened by the political unrest beginning to rumble under the foundations of the aristocratic Russian political system. The uprising of 1905 was among the first signs of trouble for those of his noble class (his eventual move to the United States was a direct result of the swallowing of his family's estate and resources by the 1917 Revolution), and he probably thought it a good time to start looking for a quiet haven.

A few years before, Rachmaninoff had been overwhelmed by an inspired performance of *Die Meistersinger* he heard at the Dresden Opera. The memory of that evening and the aura of dignity and repose exuded by the city had remained with him, and Dresden, at that time in his life, seemed like a good place to be. Besides, the city was only two hours by train from Leipzig, where Arthur Nikisch, whom Rachmaninoff considered the greatest living conductor and who had shown an interest in his music, was music director. The decision to move to Dresden was made early in 1906, and by autumn the composer, his wife and their new-born daughter were installed in a small but smart house complemented by an attractive garden. They arrived quietly, and lived, as much as possible, incognito and in seclusion. When he chanced to meet a Russian acquaintance on the street one day, Rachmaninoff pleaded, "I have escaped from my friends. Please don't give me away." The atmosphere in Dresden was so conducive to composition that within a few months of his arrival he was working on the Second Symphony, the First Piano Sonata, the Op. 6 collection of Russian folk songs and the symphonic poem *The Isle of the Dead*.

The Second Symphony was unanimously cheered when it made the rounds of the Russian concert societies in 1908, and it was an important item on Rachmaninoff's first American tour the following year. With this work, *The Isle of the Dead*, the Second and Third Concertos, and the ubiquitous Prelude in C-sharp minor, he made a profound impression on the American musical scene. He was twice offered the post of music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and twice declined. For the two decades before his death in 1943, his cross-country concert tours became an institution. Many of his compositions continue to enjoy a popularity greater in America than anywhere else in the world.

The majestic scale of the Symphony is established at the outset by a slow, brooding introduction. The low strings and then the violins give out a fragmentary theme that generates much of the material for the entire work. A smooth transition to a faster tempo signals the arrival of the main theme, an extended and quickened transformation of the basses' opening motive. The expressive second theme enters in the woodwinds. The development deals with the vigorous main theme to such an extent that the beginning of the formal recapitulation is engulfed by its surging sweep. The lovely second theme reappears as expected, again in the woodwinds. The coda resumes the energetic mood of the development to build to the fine climax that ends the movement.

The second movement is the most nimble essay to be found in Rachmaninoff's orchestral works. After two preparatory measures, the horns hurl forth the main theme, which bears more than a passing resemblance to the *Dies Irae* ("Day of Wrath"), the ancient chant from the Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead that haunted the composer for many years. The vital nature of the music, however, does not support any morbid interpretation. Eventually, the rhythmic bustle is suppressed and finally silenced to make way for the movement's central section, whose skipping lines embody some of Rachmaninoff's best fugal writing. Almost as if by magic, the opening scherzo returns amid a full-throated cry from the brass. Once again, this quiets and the movement ends on a note of considerable mystery.

The rapturous third movement, wrote Patrick Piggott, "is as romantic as any music in the orchestral repertory — if by romantic we mean the expression, through lyrical melody and richly chromatic harmony, of a sentiment which can only be described as love." This is music of heightened passion that resembles nothing so much as an ecstatic operatic love scene. Alternating with the joyous principal melody is an important theme from the first movement, heard prominently in the central portion and the coda of this movement.

The finale bursts forth in the whirling dance rhythm of an Italian *tarantella*. The propulsive urgency subsides to allow another of Rachmaninoff's wonderful, sweeping melodic inspirations to enter. A development of the *tarantella* motives follows, into which are embroidered thematic reminiscences from each of the three preceding movements. The several elements of the finale are gathered together in the closing pages to produce the rich and sonorous tapestry appropriate for the life-affirming conclusion of this grand and stirring Symphony.

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda