

## Rachmaninoff: The Isle of the Dead Rite of Passage?

### Perusal script

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### Chapter 1 *Rising and Falling*

*Darkness... and an ancient clock... The timpani begin...*

**ME 1/VO 1**            **Timps alone, 5/8 shifts, score to come, with text overlaid**

NARRATOR

...

A strange pulse... lopsided... unequal...

...

It's made by dividing the number five...

into two, plus three...

...

**[8th notes infill]**

Two plus three can reverse... and become three plus two...

...

**[reverse]**

and then back again... to two plus three...

...

**[return to opening]**

This rhythm... is asymmetrical...

like human breathing...

or... like the rowing of an oarsman in a boat...

**[end of ME 1]**

**VO 2**

ACTOR *with Chicago excitement!*

Chicago Tribune, December the 4th, 1909!

Rachmaninoff and His Tone Poem!

Sergei Rachmaninoff was given an enthusiastic reception yesterday afternoon...

A tall solemn man who evinced neither curiosity nor worry...

he moved with deliberation to the conductor's stand

and without any fuss or pose raised the baton...

**RECORDED MUSIC OF RACHMANINOFF CONDUCTING THIS PIECE**

*wait 15" or so, to let the music speak*

ACTOR *with a feeling of more thoughtfulness*

One striking characteristic is in evidence throughout...

The suggestive deliberation of the tone's ebb and flow...

a powerful current affected neither by dramatic climaxes...

nor by the restlessness inspired by the continuous rhythmic sweep...<sup>1</sup>

**ME 2** **Tutti 0-25 (downbeat, no new instruments)** **1'05"**

**VO 3**

NARRATOR

The harmonies are very simple...

and they are all held together by one deep note...

**ME 3** **Strings, harmonic skeleton 1, score to come** **20"**

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<sup>1</sup> Chicago Tribune, Dec 4 1909

**VO 4**

NARRATOR

Each bar... has this five-beat rhythm...

but the bars themselves are gathered into groups of four...

which gives the music the feeling of a ritual...

a procession moving slowly forwards...

**ME 4**      **Tutti, bars 5-8, slight pause, then 9-12**

**25"**

**VO 5**

NARRATOR

Exactly 100 years ago...

Rachmaninoff came to America for the first time...

He brought with him his new orchestral piece... 'The Isle of the Dead'...

which he conducted in Chicago, Boston and New York...

ACTOR      *The New York journalist is a touch more snobbish than the Chicago one!*  
New York Times, January the 28th, 1910...

This music is more or less in the form of a funeral march...  
with a deep and insistent rhythm...  
and figurations in the strings which seem to be intended  
to represent waves... washing against the sides of the boat...<sup>2</sup>

**ME 5      Tutti, bars 13-16      10"**

**VO 6**

NARRATOR

Three plus two... then back again to two plus three...

**ME 6      Tutti, bars 17-20      10"**

**VO 7**

NARRATOR

And now the back and forth becomes more frequent...

Two bars...

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<sup>2</sup> New York Times, Jan 28 1910

**ME 7**      **Tutti, bars 21-22**      **5"**

**VO 8**

NARRATOR

Then one bar...

**ME 8**      **Tutti, bar 23**      **3"**

**VO 9**

NARRATOR

And again one...

**ME 9**      **Tutti, bar 24**      **3"**

**VO 10**

NARRATOR

The pulse remains the same...

but there's a gathering of momentum...

pushing towards new harmonies...

**ME 10**      **Strings, harmonic skeleton 2, score to come**      **16"**

*attacca*

**ME 11**      **Bars 25-downbeat of 45**

**53"**

Chapter 2    *Dresden*

**VO 11**

NARRATOR

In 1906...

Rachmaninoff decided to go abroad...

to leave his native Russia for three years...

ACTOR      *the youthful and romantic Rachmaninoff*

Moscow has grown repugnant to me...<sup>3</sup>

I need solitude...

I need to do nothing but compose...<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bertensson and Leyda, p.39

<sup>4</sup> Rieseemann, p.132

NARRATOR

He was a world-renowned performer...

a pianist and a conductor...

but he really wanted to write music...

So he took his wife Natasha

and their three-year-old daughter Irina...

to Dresden... Germany...

ACTOR *Rachmaninoff the friend and family man*

We've found a charming place to live...

A villa in a garden.

Upstairs three bedrooms,

downstairs my study and a dining room.

Perfect!

Today they brought the piano

and tomorrow I begin to work...<sup>5</sup>

Don't tell anyone I am here!<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Letter to Morozov, November 9, 1906

<sup>6</sup> Riesemann, p.134



NARRATOR

Rachmaninoff...

had come to Germany to seek solitude... and compose...

But also... to pursue his growing fascination with German music...

with German composers... German conductors

and German symphony orchestras...

ACTOR *filled with enthusiasm*

Here in Dresden...

I've seen Richard Strauss's brand new opera, 'Salome'...

Thrilling!

His orchestration is amazing!

By comparison, the way I write for orchestra seems embarrassingly naked...<sup>7</sup>

*slight change of voice to more serious*

And I've heard Wagner too...

'Meistersinger'... and 'Tristan'....

Wonderful!

This is my spiritual nourishment!<sup>8</sup>

Chapter 3 *Movement and stasis*

**ME 12**

**Tristan prelude, opening phrase, tutti,**

**15"**

**VO 12**

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<sup>7</sup> Letter to Morozov, November 9, 1906

<sup>8</sup> Letter to Morozov, April 13, 1907

ACTOR *in response to what he has just heard*

Wagner's 'Tristan and Isolde'...

NARRATOR

An opera which begins with two people on a boat...

Rachmaninoff was inspired...

He was searching for a new musical language of his own...

ACTOR *casting off the old and searching for the new*

I've finished my symphony...

And now I'm thinking of an orchestral Fantasy...

But on what subject?

I don't know...

I'd be glad and grateful if you could send me some ideas...<sup>9</sup>

NARRATOR

And then he found what he was looking for...

a black and white engraving...

of a picture of a boat... with two people in it...

rowing across the sea towards an island...

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<sup>9</sup> Letter to Morozov, December 6th, 1906

**ME 13**      **Bars 41-45 (down beat), Eng horn, 3 clarinets, horn 2, harp, violas, basses**      **13"**

***VO 13 part 1***

NARRATOR

Rachmaninoff... echoing Wagner...

with the colours of the wind instruments...

and chromatic lines... flowing like water...

**ME 13a**      **English horn, rising chromatic scale, sounding A to A**      **4"**

***VO 13 part 2***

NARRATOR

But there's a difference...

Wagner's chromatic lines flow in opposite directions...

**ME 14**      **Chromatic lines from Tristan, score to come**      **15"**

***VO 14***

NARRATOR

Rachmaninoff's lines flow in the same direction...



**VO 17**

NARRATOR

And as the swaying boat begins to gather speed,  
a new rhythm... emerges from the deep...

**ME 18**      **Basses, bars 75-78, emphasising dotted rhythm**      **10"**

**VO 18**

NARRATOR

From the double-basses through the cellos...

**ME 19**      **Basses and cellos from 79-80, emphasising dotted rhythm**      **5"**

**VO 19**

NARRATOR

And within a few bars, this dotted rhythm has flooded  
across all the stringed instruments of the orchestra...

**ME 20**      **Tutti, bars 87-90**      **10"**

**VO 20**

NARRATOR

There was a tradition of using swaying dotted rhythms  
for waves... or boats...

Wagner... in 'Tristan and Isolde'...

**ME 21**      **Tristan prelude, from second half of page 8 of Dover score**      **13"**

Chapter 4      *The painting of 'Die Toteninsel'*

**VO 21**

ACTOR      *with boyish humour*

Here in Dresden, we live like hermits...<sup>11</sup>

I work all day... my wife is bored to tears all day...  
and my little daughter spends all day  
singing wild and piercing songs...

like something out of Strauss's 'Salome'...<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Letter to Slonov, November 21, 1906

<sup>12</sup> Letter to Mme Kerzina, December 1906

## RECORDED SNATCH OF GADSKI SINGING SALOME (1909)

NARRATOR

But Rachmaninoff was not quite the hermit he made out...

He had one close friend here,  
a fellow-musician, part-German, part-Russian...  
Nikolai von Struve...

ACTOR *remembering, many years afterwards*

Our friendship was fostered by long walks around the city...  
and in the countryside beyond...<sup>13</sup>

NARRATOR

It was von Struve who showed Rachmaninoff this picture...  
Arnold Böcklin's 'The Isle of the Dead'...  
He even took the composer to Leipzig...  
to see the original oil painting with its vivid colours...

ACTOR

I was not much moved...

I liked the picture best in black and white...<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Riesemann, pp.137-8

<sup>14</sup> Bertensson and Leyda, 155-6

NARRATOR

Nowadays, the Swiss artist, Arnold Böcklin is half-forgotten...

but once... he was...

ACTOR *defiantly*

The greatest painter of our age...<sup>15</sup>

NARRATOR

The words of Edvard Munch...

Others were less enthusiastic...

ACTOR

A strange master who belongs not to any school...

one of those take-it-or-leave-it people...<sup>16</sup>

NARRATOR

And more recently...

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in the gallery guide at the AIC Munch and Expressionism exhibition, 2009

<sup>16</sup> Jules LaFogue, Gazette des Beaux Arts, 1886



ACTOR *go for scorn and humour; the images are excruciating!*

'The Isle of the Dead' is one of the most consummate expressions of all we now most dislike about the late 19th century...<sup>17</sup>

And Arnold Böcklin is someone who would hardly appear in any serious history of art...<sup>18</sup>

NARRATOR

But a hundred years ago, this particular painting...

'The Isle of the Dead'...

was extremely popular...

and was available everywhere in magazines... on postcards...

and framed above mantelpieces in comfortable parlours...

And what appealed was its macabre symbolism...

The whole picture is made up of suggestions...

stillness... darkness... sea... and sky...

the rocky island... the cypresses which grow in cemeteries...

the ancient tombs...

the boat... the coffin, sideways on...

the two figures...

One of them is in a Greek or Roman shroud like a corpse...

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<sup>17</sup> Clement Greenberg, *The Nation*, March 22, 1947

<sup>18</sup> Tom Lubbock, *The Independent*, Jan 15, 2010

Is it the mourner? Or the spirit of the body in the coffin?  
And the oarsman...  
Why is he rowing the wrong way round... like a gondolier?  
Presumably so we cannot see his face...  
  
The whole image is deliberately unreal...

ACTOR     *the artist's words*

A painting should express feelings... like poetry...  
It should pervade the soul... like music...<sup>19</sup>

NARRATOR

The New York Times was sceptical...

ACTOR     *dry and contemptuous*

This particular picture,  
which looms familiar in engraved copies from stationers' windows,  
depicts only an island with towering cliffs...<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Böcklin, sources?

<sup>20</sup> New York Times, January 28, 1910

NARRATOR

But this is not a real island...

It's a symbol!

It's an island from a dream... or out of ancient mythology...<sup>21</sup>

Arnold Böcklin loved using symbolic images of this kind...

and so did Rachmaninoff...

Chapter 5 *Musical symbols*

**RECORDED EXAMPLE OF 'DIES IRAE' CHANT**

**VO 22**

NARRATOR

The 'Dies irae'... from the Roman Catholic Requiem...

ACTOR *translating what we have just heard*

Day of wrath!

That day

will dissolve the world in ashes...

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<sup>21</sup> See Mary Beard, for further discussion of the tradition of 'Islands of the Dead'

NARRATOR

This mediaeval chant about the Last Judgement  
was first brought into modern concert music by Berlioz...  
in his Fantastic Symphony...

**ME 22**      **Scrap of Berlioz Symphonie fantastique last movement (flgs, contra, tuba, bells) - 20"**

**VO 23**

NARRATOR

Rachmaninoff loved the Fantastic Symphony...  
And in New York... he heard it conducted by Gustav Mahler...

ACTOR      *on the edge between respect and humour*  
He obtained a crescendo such as I have never heard...  
The windows shook, the very walls vibrated...<sup>22</sup>

NARRATOR

But when Rachmaninoff himself uses this same melody  
he treats it in a very different way...

He takes only the first four notes...

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<sup>22</sup> Riesemann, 158-160