PROGRAM NOTES

Sergei Rachmaninov - Symphony No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 13

Sergei Rachmaninov

Born April 1, 1873, Semyonovo, Russia.
Died March 28, 1943, Beverly Hills, California.

Symphony No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 13

Rachmaninov would have become famous if he had done nothing but play the piano. But his true aspiration was to become a composer. At the Moscow Conservatory, his teacher Nikolai Zverev encouraged him to stick to the piano instead of writing music and resented his taking composition classes with Sergei Taneyev and Anton Arensky. After Rachmaninov tried his hand at composing some piano pieces—he even started an opera, Esmerelda—he realized that he was unable to choose between composition and performance, and so he ultimately decided to pursue both (eventually becoming a fine conductor as well).

In 1889, the year he and Zverev parted ways, he sketched and abandoned a piano concerto, but the one he began the following year is his first major work—the one that became his op. 1. This is the score that sealed his fate as a composer, and it was completed in a rush of passion and elation, with Rachmaninov working from five in the morning until eight in the evening, and scoring the last two movements in just two and a half days. Rachmaninov played the first movement with orchestra in a concert of student works at the conservatory in March 1892. (He played it with the Chicago Symphony when he made his debut in Orchestra Hall, on December 3, 1909—the first of his eight appearances with the orchestra.)

Rachmaninov quickly began to draw attention as a composer. The brooding piano prelude in C-sharp minor he composed in 1892, at the age of nineteen, immediately became the calling card of a young artist’s dreams (and eventually a burden as well: audiences wouldn’t let him leave the stage until he played the work he eventually referred to dismissively as “it”). In 1893, Tchaikovsky, who was already impressed with Rachmaninov’s talent, interrupted work on his final symphony, the Pathétique, to attend the premiere of Rachmaninov’s first opera, Aleko, based on Pushkin’s poem The Gypsies.

But the real mark of a nineteenth-century composer was the symphony. And so, at the age of twenty-two—and in the same decade as Tchaikovsky’s Pathétique, Brahms’s Fourth, Saint-Saëns’s Organ, Mahler’s First, Bruckner’s Eighth, and Dvorák’s New World—Rachmaninov set out to write a symphony. In truth, he had already tested the waters, first with an orchestral scherzo he wrote at the age of thirteen, then with an Allegro composed shortly after his first piano concerto. He
was now ready to join the company of the great romantic symphonists, and as he began a new symphony in D minor, he was filled with excitement and assurance. Work went well, ideas came to him swiftly, and his enthusiasm did not wane.

But with the premiere of his First Symphony in Saint Petersburg in 1897, under the baton of the composer Alexander Glazunov, Rachmaninov’s confidence and momentum—if not his entire career—suddenly seemed to fizzle. The performance must have been appalling—Rachmaninov called it “the most agonizing hour of my life.” He hid in a stairwell, with his hands over his ears. (Glazunov was later said to have been drunk when he walked on stage.) And the opening-night review, by composer César Cui (the only member of the so-called Russian Five whose music is never performed today), could hardly have been worse—the symphony, Cui concluded, “would have brought ecstasy to the inhabitants of hell.”

The audience response was scarcely warmer, though many listeners that night may have suspected what Rachmaninov had already learned the hard way: that, for all his prestige in Russian musical circles, Glazunov was a lousy conductor. “How could so great a musician as Glazunov conduct so badly?” Rachmaninov later asked. “It is not even a question of his conducting technique, poor as that is, but of his musicianship; he beats time as if he had no feeling for music at all.” Nevertheless, the damage had been done, and Rachmaninov could not recover his nerve or his musical ambitions. Much later he recalled: “The despair that filled my soul would not leave me. My dreams of a brilliant career lay shattered. My hopes and confidence were destroyed.” Rachmaninov withdrew the symphony and refused to have it published, as if suppressing the score would also erase the memory.

For the next three years he wrote nothing—sketches for a new symphony were abandoned, and work on an opera, Francesca da Rimini, was shelved. He continued to perform, and even undertook a concert tour to London in 1898, but day after day he found that he was unable to compose. As he grew more despondent, his friends began to recommend various remedies. Twice he visited Leo Tolstoy, once by himself and once with the bass Fyodor Chaliapin, hoping that contact with the great novelist would shake him out of his slump and jump-start his creativity, but the writer’s self-serving platitudes discouraged him even more. (“You must work,” Tolstoy told him. “I work every day.”) When he and Chaliapin performed one of Rachmaninov’s songs, Tolstoy wasted no words in conveying how much he disliked it.

Finally, fearing that Rachmaninov was trapped in a serious depression, his family suggested that he consult Dr. Nikolai Dahl, a Paris internist who had become a specialist in curing alcoholism through hypnosis. At the end of 1899, after months of almost daily sessions, Rachmaninov was again able to face the challenge of writing a large-scale orchestral work, and he began a new piano concerto. But, even with the wild success of his Second Piano Concerto—one of the most popular and beloved works in the form—the idea of composing a symphony still haunted and terrified him. When he did unveil a second symphony, ten years after the First, Rachmaninov swore it would be his last. Then, twenty-eight years later, he started work on the Third Symphony that did, in fact, turn out to be the final one of his career.

The four movements of Rachmaninov’s First Symphony are unified by a single idea, introduced immediately after the slow introduction to the first movement, that echoes the shape of the Dies irae—the familiar phrase from the sequence for the Gregorian Mass for the Dead that would recur in several of Rachmaninov’s most important works over the years, including
The Isle of the Dead, which the Chicago Symphony performs at the end of March, and explores in greater depth in Beyond the Score. Each of the subsequent movements opens with a reference to this motto. The second-movement scherzo is fleet and light-footed. The expansive Larghetto is the prototype of the great slow movements in the symphonies and concertos yet to come. The finale is grand, festive, occasionally flamboyant, and sometimes menacing, and here Rachmaninov’s signature melody comes closest to actually quoting the Dies irae theme. The entire score is strong, highly individual, and self-assured. It is the work of a young talent overflowing with ideas, not an artist paralyzed by failure.

Although Rachmaninov never destroyed his score of the First Symphony, leaving it behind when he left Russia to settle in the West, eventually it was given up for lost. After the composer’s death, a two-piano transcription of the symphony surfaced in Moscow, followed by a set of orchestral parts at the conservatory in Saint Petersburg. In March 1945, the symphony was performed in Moscow for the first time since its 1897 premiere. This week’s performances are the Chicago Symphony’s first ever.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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