

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Sergei Rachmaninov

Born April 1, 1873, Semyonovo, Russia.

Died March 28, 1943, Beverly Hills, California.

***The Isle of the Dead*, Symphonic Poem for Large Orchestra on the Painting by A. Böcklin, Op. 29**

Rachmaninov began *The Isle of the Dead* in January 1909 and completed the score on April 17. He conducted the first performance on May 1 of that year, in Moscow. The score calls for three flutes and piccolo, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, six horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately nineteen minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Rachmaninov's *The Isle of the Dead* were given at Orchestra Hall on December 3 and 4, 1909, with the composer conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on October 31, November 1 and 2, 2002, with William Eddins conducting. The Orchestra first performed this work at the Ravinia Festival on June 21, 2002, with William Eddins conducting, and most recently on July 9, 2004, with Leonard Slatkin conducting.

Rachmaninov first saw Arnold Böcklin's popular painting, *The Isle of the Dead*, in a black-and-white reproduction in Paris in 1907. He was so haunted by this mysterious image, with its solitary island-bound boat bearing a coffin, that he began to write music almost at once, without even waiting to see the full-color original. When he later traveled to Leipzig to view one of the five different versions Böcklin painted of *The Isle of the Dead*, he said nothing could match his first impression—he even suggested that he might never have composed *The Isle of the Dead* had he seen the painting first. (The fourth of Böcklin's canvases was destroyed in World War II. Another of the paintings belonged to Hitler for many years; it is now in the collection of the National Gallery of the State Museums of Berlin.)

Marie Berna, a young German widow, had asked Böcklin for a picture to dream by—"ein Bild zum Träumen." The painting he sent her in 1880—and its sequels, each like a musical variation on a theme—was almost instantly recognized as a defining icon of late romanticism. For years, many artists fell under its spell—only four years after Rachmaninov, Max Reger composed another orchestral interpretation of the same scene. Rachmaninov could never adequately explain why he was so moved by Böcklin's image or how he translated it so spontaneously into music: "When it came, how it began—how can I say? It came up within me, was entertained, written down."

Rachmaninov begins with the irregular movement of oars in the water. (Mahler's Seventh Symphony, completed just four years earlier, also begins with the stroke of oars on a lake.) The opening is dark—just low strings, with timpani and harp at first—and mysterious. For a very long time, we move forward with little sense of destination, but with a growing urgency. (Tantalizing melodic fragments appear from time to time, like glimpses through the mist, and a haunting high violin theme takes wing at one point.) Finally, the island comes into sight, the music gathers force and direction, and at last we hear the *Dies irae*, the Gregorian chant from the Mass for the Dead—a motto of mortality that recurs often in Rachmaninov's music. Then suddenly the music is suffused with life—urgent, passionate, and joyous. (Here Rachmaninov departs from the painting, although Böcklin did in fact paint a complementary *Isle of Life* two years after his last *Isle of the Dead* canvas.) But the *Dies irae* rings out, and the music is again

clouded in shadows. The ending is mostly still, and we are left where we began, with the sound of ceaseless rowing.

Rachmaninov conducted his brand new *The Isle of the Dead* when he made his debut with the Chicago Symphony in December 1909. "Sergei Rachmaninoff was given an enthusiastic reception yesterday afternoon," the *Tribune* reported. "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." After intermission, he returned in his more familiar role as piano soloist, to perform his Second Piano Concerto with music director Frederick Stock conducting. Rachmaninov would return to the Orchestra seven more times over the years, eventually playing all four of his piano concertos as well as the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, and conducting his Third Symphony and *The Bells*. His final appearance here was in February 1943, the month before he died.

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

For the Record

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Rachmaninov's *The Isle of the Dead* in 1957 with Fritz Reiner conducting for RCA.

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