PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

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

Symphony No. 2 in E Minor, Op. 27

Rachmaninov composed this symphony between October 1906 and April 1907 and conducted the premiere in Saint Petersburg on January 26, 1908. The score calls for three flutes and piccolo, three oboes and english horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, glockenspiel, bass drum, snare drum, cymbals, and strings. Performance time is approximately fifty-six minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Rachmaninov’s Second Symphony were given at Orchestra Hall on November 3 and 4, 1911, with Frederick Stock conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on January 17, 18, and 19, 2008, with Antonio Pappano conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on July 24, 1937, with Hans Lange conducting, and most recently on July 10, 2004, with Leonard Slatkin conducting.

It is astonishing that Rachmaninov ever wrote a second symphony. He was so shattered by the disastrous, ill-received premiere of his first symphony in 1897—“the most agonizing hour of my life,” as he later put it—that, for the next three years, he suffered from chronic depression, and struggled day after day with a composer’s worst fear—the inability to write a page of music worth saving. Sketches for a new symphony were abandoned, and work on an opera, Francesca da Rimini, was shelved. Rachmaninov visited Leo Tolstoy, hoping that contact with the great, larger-than-life novelist would stimulate his creativity, but their conversations discouraged him even more.

Finally, at his friends’ insistence, in 1900 he went to see Dr. Nikolai Dahl, a psychiatrist noted for treating alcoholism through hypnosis. (Dahl also was an amateur violinist and a great music lover.) After four months of Dahl’s hypnosis—“You will work with great facility” was one of the doctor’s often-repeated leitmotifs—Rachmaninov suddenly recovered. He not only began to compose again—and with great facility—but he also soon finished the score that became his most popular work—the Second Piano Concerto, which he dedicated to Dahl. Rachmaninov played the piano solo at the triumphant premiere of the concerto in 1901, proving to the public that he had left his difficulties behind with the old century.

The writing block had been overcome, but if the piano concerto marked the turning point, it was his second symphony that proved his ultimate victory, as well as his vindication.

After the success of the concerto, Rachmaninov returned to composition on a regular basis (although he still made time for concert appearances both as pianist and as conductor—a new role he had taken up during his creative crisis). He now wrote steadily—piano pieces, songs, a cello sonata, and two operas, including the shelved Francesca da Rimini. By the fall of 1906, Rachmaninov was such a celebrity in his native land that, in order to escape the public eye, he moved, with his wife and infant daughter, to Dresden, chosen with no more reason than the memory of a fine performance of Die Meistersinger he had attended there. (He also liked being near Leipzig, the home of his favorite conductor, Arthur Nikisch, and the celebrated Gewandhaus Orchestra.)
In Dresden, where he once again became a full-time composer, Rachmaninov at last began to sketch a new symphony, with sudden difficulty and in total secrecy—obviously he had not banished the painful memories of his first. Finally, in February 1907, when word of his newest project leaked out in the German press, he confessed to a friend, “I have composed a symphony. It’s true! . . . I finished it a month ago and immediately put it aside. It was a severe worry to me and I am not going to think about it any more.” But by the summer he was back at work, polishing the symphony for its public unveiling. Rachmaninov conducted the work at the Saint Petersburg premiere in January 1908, with great, reassuring success. The symphony won the Glinka Prize of 1,000 rubles that year and quickly made the rounds of the major orchestras of the world (It was performed in Chicago for the first time in 1911).

But Rachmaninov’s vindication was a qualified one, for wherever the symphony was performed, except under the composer’s own baton, it was so extensively cut that this almost hour-long symphony was sometimes reduced to a mere forty-five minutes. Few other major works of orchestral music, including Bruckner’s most misunderstood symphonies, were regularly presented to the public in such a savagely butchered state. These traditional cuts (the New York Philharmonic has kept a list of twenty-nine cuts supposedly approved by the composer) range from tiny, but still disfiguring snips—a measure or two of introductory accompaniment, for example—to major surgery, such as the removal of the main theme from the recapitulation of the Adagio. The true stature of Rachmaninov’s Second Symphony was largely unsuspected. Ironically, a score that was routinely cut because its material was considered too insubstantial to sustain its length ended up sounding even more inconsequential, with its balance skewed and its forward sweep blunted. Only in recent years, when conductors have begun to play the piece in its entirety, has Rachmaninov’s true achievement as a composer been revealed. (At these performances, Jaap van Zweden conducts the symphony uncut.)

Throughout Rachmaninov’s life, it was fashionable—if not in fact honorable in progressive music circles—to disparage his music. Rachmaninov had always worried that by splitting his time between playing the piano, conducting, and composing, he had spread himself too thin. “I have chased three hares,” he once said. “Can I be certain that I have captured one?” For many years Rachmaninov’s stature as a pianist was undisputed. (He regularly performed with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, beginning in 1909, when he played his Second Piano Concerto here during his first American tour; he appeared with the orchestra for the last time in 1943, just six weeks before his death, as the soloist in Beethoven’s First Piano Concerto and his own Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini.)

But by the time of his death in 1943, he had been written off as an old-fashioned composer—hopelessly sentimental, out-of-touch, and irrelevant. As Virgil Thomson told the young playwright Edward Albee in 1948, “It is really extraordinary, after all, that a composer so famous should have enjoyed so little the esteem of his fellow composers.” (Rachmaninov’s great Russian contemporary, Igor Stravinsky, for example, never could stomach the music or the man, even when they were neighbors in Los Angeles. “A six-foot scowl,” was his summation of his famously grim-faced colleague.) The sacrosanct Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, in its fifth edition, concluded its dismal appraisal of his output: “The enormous popular success some few of Rachmaninov’s works had in his lifetime is not likely to last and musicians never regarded it with much favor.” But in the past few years, his star has been on the rise. Now, as Rachmaninov always hoped, it is his music and not his piano playing that keeps his name alive.

Even Rachmaninov eventually admitted that his first symphony was in fact a “weak, childish, strained, and bombastic” work—words no more sympathetic than those of César Cui’s devastating opening-night review. (Cui suggested that Rachmaninov’s music sprang straight from a conservatory in hell.) The new symphony proves how seriously Rachmaninov took the challenges of the form the second time around. The first movement is quite long, but it only demonstrates Rachmaninov’s command of extended paragraphs and his mastery of carefully controlled suspense. As a conscious effort to unify the entire work, Rachmaninov begins quietly and slowly, with a low string “motto” theme that reappears, already disguised, as early as the main violin melody that takes over once the tempo picks up.

The second movement is a very lively, brilliantly orchestrated scherzo that unexpectedly makes way for a broad, lyrical melody of characteristic lushness. The trio midsection begins with a fugue launched by the second violins. After the return of the scherzo, Rachmaninov introduces the same Dies irae chant melody that he also cites in his Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini and The Isle of the Dead.
The Adagio opens with a lovely, sighing violin gesture—it would sustain an entire movement for many a romantic composer—that Rachmaninov quickly pushes aside for a generous, long-breathed clarinet melody. (It unfolds slowly, circling, but never repeating itself, for some twenty-two measures.) At the end, the clarinet and violins exchange roles.

The finale begins with festive, dancing music; continues with a big theme destined to return, triumphantly, at the end; and even stops, for just six measures, to reconsider the melody from the slow movement. The development section crests with an astonishing passage of descending scales, cascading at different speeds and from different heights, like the clangorous pealing of bells. And the big melody, one of Rachmaninov's finest, does not disappoint, but returns, in octaves, to sweep in the final cadences.

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