Rachmaninoff

Symphony No. 2 In E Minor (Op. 27)

Played by

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and the

MINNEAPOLIS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Musical Masterpiece Series

Album M-239

Sergei Vassilievitch Rachmaninoff

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF was born April 1, 1873 at Onega in the Government of Novgorod, Russia. He showed a liking for music at an early age, and in his fourth year made his interest so clearly known to his family that his mother undertook the first guidance of the baby hands whose maturer digital dexterity would one day command the attention of the entire world. Five years later he entered the Conservatory of Leningrad (St. Petersburg), where he studied piano and theory. When his family moved to Moscow in 1885, he attended the Conservatory there, studying piano first with a pupil of the great Liszt, and then with Alexander Siloti, his own cousin. His ability as a pianist soon evinced itself and he easily won a prize for playing. Interpreting the compositions of others, giving artistic expression to *their* genius, and unfolding the musical beauty of the past to the living generation is in itself a great talent. In its highest sense it is given to a few, and it is not unusual that a virtuoso leaves, as a monument to his artistry, little else than the short-lived memory of brilliant playing. Not so Rachmaninoff, for while still a student at the Conservatory his talent further expressed itself in the urge to compose. His teachers in composition were Arensky and Taneieff. Tschaikowsky was an honorary instructor there, and served in an advisory capacity to a small class in composition of which Rachmaninoff became a member. Soon he began working on an opera, Aleko, which won him a prize at the Conservatory, and introduced him to the world as a composer. Just how forcibly the contact with Tschaikowsky may have made itself felt upon the creative genius of the young composer has been the subject of conjecture. Suffice it is to say that Tschaikowsky was interested in Rachmaninoff and attended rehearsals for the performance of Aleko which profited greatly by his vast experience and knowledge. The opera was performed at Moscow in April 1892 when the

composer was not yet twenty years of age. With highest honor both as pianist and composer to his credit, Rachmaninoff withdrew from the Conservatory. The successful reception of his opera encouraged him to continue composing, and the year following the first production of Aleko found him busily engaged in several serious works, one, Trio Elegiac (à la memoire d'un grand artiste), written in memory of Tschaikowsky, who died in October 1893. (Tschaikowsky himself composed a Piano-forte Trio in A Minor dedicated to the memory of his friend Nicholas Rubinstein when that musician died.)

In 1893 Rachmaninoff was appointed professor of piano-forte at a girls' school in Moscow, and during a period of teaching, composing, and concertizing he became very well-known in his native Russia. He was also developing another phase of his genius—the art of conducting. In 1897 he became conductor of a private opera company in Moscow, and in 1899 visited London at the invitation of the Philharmonic Society in order to conduct his own composition, "The Cliff." He made his first appearance in Vienna as a pianist in 1902, returning to Russia to assume the duties of conductor of the Imperial Theatre at Moscow. In 1906 he resigned that position to devote himself unrestrictedly to composition, and left Moscow to make his home in Dresden.

That music is dependent upon rhythm and melody is an axiom ages old; and the application of these two factors to creative ability results in the establishment of individuality in musical composition. The highest ambition of the composer is melodic creation, for only the purest melodies survive. That is the reason many composers have used peasant songs of their native countries as fundamental themes upon which to build their melodies. Creative work is the result of many contributing factors, but the real source of inspiration must come from within. All the grandeur of nature, the beauty of painting, and the sublimity of poetry cannot produce an inspiration unless there is a divine creative inner spark. That Sergei Rachmaninoff has this divine spark is proclaimed by every piece of music he has written. From the shortest song whose

melody and accompaniment are comparable to a beautifully set gem, to the lengthier compositions in which inner voices mingle in suspended mutation, sometimes impassioned, sometimes melancholy, but always melodious, the compositions of Rachmaninoff have earned the right to endure. His writings, always clearly presented, are never angular. Consider his superb climaxes, which in their recession are marked by the same gradual progression that characterizes their development —describing, so to speak, an impressively sweeping curve.

It is not unnatural to suppose that music such as Rachmaninoff has composed emanates from a sensitive soul . . . and sensitive souls suffer. Rachmaninoff has known his share of sadness, but it has not colored his writings with the hopeless melancholy of that other great Russian, Tschaikowsky. Rather it has tinged them with an inspired loftiness, which, although at times on the verge of despair, precludes pessimism. His piano pieces are said to express his most intimate moods, and range from poetic tranquillity, such as Melodie, opus 10, No. 4, to the tempestuous surge of the B-flat Major Prelude, and among his compositions in larger form his Symphonic Poem, The Island of the Dead, opus 29 (suggested by Böcklin's famous painting of the same name) and his Symphony No. 2 in E Minor, opus 27, are outstanding.

THE SYMPHONY

Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2, in E Minor, which was written during the composer's residence in Dresden, 1906–07, was given the Glinka prize of one thousand rubles in December 1908. This prize was established by Mitrosan Petrowich Belaïew, who founded a publishing house for Russian compositions alone, at Leipzig in 1885. Rachmaninoff's famous C Minor Piano Concerto was also awarded this prize in 1904.

This composer's creative power receives its greatest stimulus from impressions outside the realm of music. Personal experiences, painting, or poetry have inspired some of his greatest compositions, so that they fall naturally into the

classification of program music. Although the composer has indicated no definite program for the E Minor Symphony, the pervading darkness of the music . . . its threatening chords, and the oppressive groans that swell and then subside, suggest thoughts of the relentless hand of fate and a premonition of death. Even when the music rises to heights of ecstasy the mood of foreboding penetrates with dull warnings and casts an apprehensive shadow across its exuberant brightness.

FIRST MOVEMENT

Largo. Allegro moderato (E Minor)

The opening phrases of the introduction to the first movement of the symphony establish its mood. 'Cellos and double-basses give a picture of somberness, and the violins and wind instruments follow with music that mounts like an impassioned cry of anguish . . . a struggle to be free from torment. From this pinnacle the descending passages suggest the quiet sob-shaken grief that comes with resignation to the inevitable.

Near the end of Record One a solo for English horn leads to the statement of the main portion of the movement, *Allegro moderato.* This begins, after a short introductory figure, on Record Two, and continues the mood of contemplation in somewhat brighter aspect and with more animated tempo. About the middle of Record Two a second theme in G Major is presented. It is divided between wind and string instruments in which an elaborate triplet figure is prominent. Soon the melody soars upward in the strings building to an impassioned climax which is followed by a long *diminuendo.* Upon these themes, presented with changes in scoring and tonality, the subsequent material of the movement is constructed. The chief theme of the symphony is heard by solo violin, then by remaining strings and wind instruments (Record Two). Sinister chords and mutterings in the bass (Record Three) and a *fanfare* of brass pass in terrifying agitation before the return of the melodious second theme (Record Four), which precedes the dramatic close of the movement.

SECOND MOVEMENT

Allegro molto, A Minor

Like a lively *Scherzo* this movement commences vigorously with a horn theme and an energetic figure in the woodwinds and strings. This music is exciting and rings out like the peal of clanging bells for the celebration of some Russian holiday. About one third through Record Five a rocking passage for the clarinet ushers in the second theme which is assigned to the strings. This broad lyrical melody is in direct contrast to what has gone before. Its tranquillity could easily obliterate the atmosphere created by the opening theme of the movement, were it not that in a long *diminuendo* the rhythmic pulse of the accompaniment brings back, in modified speed, the opening theme, which soon proceeds with the energy of its original statement. In the gradual *diminuendo* and slackening of tempo at the close of Record Five the music dies away to come to life again with the loud chord which announces the Trio (meno mosso) (the beginning of Record Six). The second violins begin this section, which is imitated by the first violins four bars later, and then is developed into a brilliant *fugato* passage. The brasses introduce a march-like theme over which violins and woodwinds play a dainty figure. As this terminates, a sharp chord leads to a passage that repeats the opening subject of the movement, and then, after references to material already used that is now punctuated with emphatic syncopation, the second movement ends.

THIRD MOVEMENT

Adagio, A Major

Haunting music that touches the heart is the opening theme of the slow movement. The beginning portion is assigned to the first violins, whose beautiful song is scarcely finished before the clarinet enters with another melody, which in its turn gives place to a third (about one inch from end of Record Seven) given to first violins and oboe. Toward the close of Record Seven and at the beginning of Record Eight the middle section of the movement occurs. It consists of the

development of the theme heard in the introduction upon which the principal subject of the movement was constructed. An intricate working out of this material is followed by a plaintive figure for English horn (beginning of Record Eight), which is then commented upon by members of the woodwind choir. At the beginning of Record Nine, the French horn plays the opening theme of the *Adagio*, which the solo violin then repeats, while woodwinds accompany with the main theme of the first movement. A skillful interweaving of the three motives of the *Adagio* follows . . . long sweeping lines of heavenly melody that you will want to play repeatedly in order to follow separately each of the contributing phrases. These build to a sonorous climax, after which the *Adagio* terminates quietly.

FOURTH MOVEMENT

Allegro Vivace E Major

A *fortissimo* introduction of four measures for full orchestra precedes the entrance of the principal theme, which advances with lively tempo and considerable volume until a *diminuendo* leads to a march-like theme in woodwinds and horns (about one inch from the beginning of Record Ten). After the return of the opening measures a brief transition passage leads to a second theme in D Major. The strings play it (halfway through Record Ten) and in its majestic strains are the glory of triumph . . . the achieving of a goal!

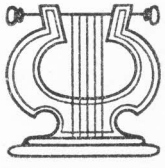
After this theme is introduced it is followed by a section that combines a suggestion of the slow movement (first violins) and portions of the opening theme of the symphony (woodwinds).

A development of the main theme of the *finale* begins abruptly in the violins (Record Eleven), and is followed by passages for flute reminiscent of the initial theme of the symphony. Then a section featuring the principal theme of the *finale* in the woodwinds, with a counter-theme for violins, is heard. The brasses repeat the march-like theme (Record Twelve) and after a *fortissimo* repetition of the triumphal

theme is heard in the violins, a Coda patterned on the triplet figure of the main subject closes the movement brilliantly.

THE ARTISTS

This recording by the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra was directed by the gifted young Hungarian, Eugene Ormandy. His scintillating performances as guest conductor of many of the country's leading orchestras won him his appointment as permanent conductor of the Minneapolis Orchestra and made him a host of friends throughout the land.



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