

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27

- I. Largo: Allegro moderato
- II. Allegro molto
- III. Adagio
- IV. Allegro vivace

The premiere of Sergei Rachmaninoff's First Symphony, on March 27, 1897, was an unmitigated disaster. Indifferently conducted by Alexander Glazunov, the performance was savaged by the critics. The result was that the young composer fell into the depths of a severe depression that would last for the better part of three years. He lost confidence in his abilities and also the desire to compose. In 1900, he turned to Dr. Nikolai Dahl, a pioneer in the field of suggestion and hypnosis therapy for help. It worked and Rachmaninoff found his muse to compose the brilliant Piano Concerto No. 2, which premiered to great success in 1901. By 1906 his exhausting schedule of concerts as both pianist and conductor, at the expense of composition, required a long sabbatical. Along with his wife and young daughter, he left Moscow for Dresden, where the family resided for the next three years. There he composed two of his finest symphonic works; the symphonic poem *The Isle of the Dead* and the Second Symphony. The Second received its premier in Moscow on February 15, 1909 to great success. As a result, Rachmaninoff was awarded the Glinka Prize for the second time and the critical acclaim that followed assured his future success and helped to erase the dark days of the past. The American premiere took place on November 26, 1909. The Philadelphia Orchestra performed with Rachmaninoff conducting, one of his first performances in the United States.

Rachmaninoff was, by the turn of the century, a very conservative composer in the Russian tradition of Tchaikovsky. As David Ewen has stated: "Where Tchaikovsky had left off, he carried on. It was as if the modernism of such men as Stravinsky and Prokofiev, and the mysticism of Scriabin, had made no impression on Russian music." Throughout his life, Rachmaninoff composed music that belonged to the Romantic period and he did so without apology. "I try to make music speak simply and directly that which is in my heart at the time I am composing. If there is love there, or bitterness, or sadness, or religion, these moods become part of my music, and it becomes either beautiful, or bitter, or sad, or religious. For composing music is as much a part of my living as breathing and eating. I compose music because I must give expression to my feelings, just as I talk because I must give utterance to my thoughts." Contemporary critics dismissed his compositions and it is interesting to look at how Rachmaninoff was viewed in the article written about him for the 1954 edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. In this ten volume work, Rachmaninoff was given just two pages. "The enormous popular success some few of Rachmaninoff's works had in his lifetime is not likely to last, and musicians never regarded it with much favor." How incredibly wrong that scholarly view has proven to be. It now seems that there is a place in the repertoire for music with beautiful melodies and lush harmonies. Sergei Rachmaninoff left his native Russia, never to return, in 1917. He eventually became a citizen of the United States and died at his home in Beverly Hills, California on March 28, 1943.

The Second Symphony is set in four movements. The first begins with an extended *Largo* introduction in which the thematic material presented provides the basis for the entire symphony. This introduction leads directly into the *Allegro moderato*, an extensive example of Rachmaninoff's mastery of both form and orchestration. Reversing the normal order of movements, Rachmaninoff placed the Scherzo, *Allegro molto*, second and what a movement of rhythmic vitality it is. The third, *Adagio*, provides some of the most passionate and romantic music that he ever composed. The opening solo for the clarinet is as Jack Diether has stated: "one of the lyric crowns of Rachmaninoff's orchestral music." The Finale, *Allegro vivace*, is a boisterous movement featuring robust fanfares and dashing dance rhythms. The restatement of themes from previous movements leads to a conclusion of noble power and brilliance.

--*Stephen Larmore*