

Program Notes for Wednesday, August 3

Alasdair Neale, Conductor

Rachmaninoff Symphony No. 2 in E Minor, Opus 27
 Largo – Allegro moderato
 Allegro molto
 Adagio
 Allegro vivace

Symphony No. 2 in E Minor, Opus 27 (1906-8) **Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)**

After the disastrous debut of his First Symphony in 1897 and the debilitating depression that its poor reception engendered, Rachmaninoff was reluctant to undertake another purely orchestral work. But the ensuing years brought him success and happiness: his Second Piano Concerto was widely admired, his career as a pianist continued to bear fruit, and his new wife and daughter were sources of great joy. By 1906, the stability of Rachmaninoff's career enabled him to escape the hustle and bustle — and political unrest — of Moscow for Dresden, where he hoped the peace and quiet would give him a chance to focus on his composition. Rachmaninoff enjoyed the anonymity of Dresden: he once told a passerby, "I have escaped my friends — please don't give me away!" The three year period that he spent in Dresden was one of intense focus. During this time, Rachmaninoff composed his Fifteen Songs, the First Piano Sonata, the tone poem *Isle of the Dead*, and the Second Symphony. The latter two are the first purely symphonic works Rachmaninoff had composed since the 1897 concert.

Rachmaninoff sketched the lush and unabashedly romantic Second Symphony rather quickly, but the orchestration of his massive work took him many months. In fact, he was still orchestrating in January, 1908, just days before the work's premiere in St. Petersburg, the very place that his First Symphony had failed so miserably eleven years earlier. The response was different this time around; critic Yuli Engel's reaction was typical:

Despite his 34 years, Rachmaninoff is one of the most significant figures in the contemporary music world, a worthy successor to Tchaikovsky This was confirmed most impressively by the new E minor Symphony. After listening with unflinching attention to its four movements, one notes with surprise that the hands of the watch have moved 65 minutes forward How fresh, how beautiful it is!

Despite its successful premiere, the work's epic length made it difficult to program, and performances outside of Russia were infrequent. To rectify the situation, some conductors cut parts of Rachmaninoff's score to make it more manageable, and for a period of time, the Second Symphony was best known in a raggedly abbreviated form. Eugene Ormandy was one of the few who tried to consult with Rachmaninoff on the cuts. He reports that when he asked the composer if some of the symphony could be excised, Rachmaninoff replied,

'Perhaps. You come to me and I will help you.' So I went to him with the score. In the first movement, after the introduction, there is a four-bar vamp until the main theme begins. 'Oh, you can cut two bars there,' Rachmaninoff said. And that was all. That was the only cut he would allow. 'You don't know what cuts do to me,' he said; 'It is like cutting a piece out of my heart.'

Thankfully, this practice of cutting works has fallen out of favor. This evening, we hear the original, complete version of the symphony.

The symphony opens with a mysterious, chant-like phrase in the low strings that will become a recurrent motto throughout the entire symphony, often returning in veiled form. The extended, passionate introduction embodies an arch-like dynamic with a gradual crescendo to a climax followed by a decrescendo to a melancholy English horn solo that links to the Allegro. Throughout the symphony, Rachmaninoff uses English horn and clarinet lines as bridges between sections. The two themes of the main section are contrasting: the first, appearing in the violins is quite dark, and the G major second much brighter and luxuriously romantic. In the development, the brass gradually becomes more prominent, leading to a dramatic climax. The E minor coda returns to the gloomier mood of the first theme.

Rachmaninoff was perhaps recalling Beethoven's Ninth when he placed his A minor scherzo in the second movement (as opposed to the more typical third). The horns introduce the energetic scherzo theme over a galloping ostinato in the violins. The second part of the scherzo (bridged to the first by the clarinet) shifts to a lush, sustained C major melody. The trio section, featuring a brisk staccato fugue in the strings, is a perfect example of Rachmaninoff's often overlooked skill in contrapuntal writing. In the coda, a brass choir recalls the opening motto.

The main theme of the A major Adagio truly wears its heart on its sleeve. The sentimental theme appears first in the violins and recurs three additional times over the course of the movement. The second melody, taken up by a solo clarinet, is a beautifully sustained, lyrical line that is later repeated by the violins. The middle section of the movement is a gentle dialogue between the winds and the strings. Echoes of the first movement motto appear intermittently in this movement, and it is directly quoted in the coda.

The E major Finale is a raucous rondo (**ABACDABA**) with a main theme built around whirling triplets that are passed all over the orchestra. The texture thins in the **B** section to project a G# minor march led by the winds. The broad, leaping theme at the beginning of the **C** section bears some resemblance to the sentimental theme from the Adagio, especially in its initial upward gesture. At the end of this section, Rachmaninoff sneaks in a direct quote of that Adagio theme ingeniously accompanied by the motto theme from the first movement! The darker **D** section builds to a repeat of the celebratory **A** section. The triumphant final bars of the piece bring back the opening motto once more, now boldly in the brass section, as if to indicate a final victory. The stirring optimism of the finale reflected Rachmaninoff's mood in Dresden, fully recovered from the First Symphony debacle and still years away from World War I and the Revolution of 1917, which would eventually drive him from his homeland for good.