

Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27 (1908)

By Sergei Rachmaninoff (Semyonovo, Russia, 1873 – Beverley Hills, California, 1943)

Circumstances of Composition

Rachmaninoff had already established himself as a talented pianist and composer in Russia by the time he wrote his First Symphony (Op. 13), so the vitriolic criticism that greeted its premiere in 1897 came as a shock to him. César Cui, the critic and nationalistic composer, went so far as to compare the symphony to the seven plagues of Egypt as orchestrated by a student at a conservatory in Hell. Three fallow years followed, during which Rachmaninoff didn't write a note. It took a course of psychological hypnosis for him to recover his confidence as a composer and begin to write his Second Piano Concerto (Op. 18), which won the prestigious Glinka Award.

In 1906 he left Moscow for Dresden to escape the demands of his conducting career. There, nearly a decade after the disaster of his First, he began composing his Second Symphony. Despite the success of the Piano Concerto No. 2, he was by no means confident in his ability to write a large-scale instrumental work when his first attempt at the symphonic genre had ended so dismally. The going proved slow and frustrating. To his friend Nikita Morozov he confessed, "When I get [the Second Symphony] written and then correct my *First* Symphony, I give my solemn word – no more symphonies. Curse them! I don't know how to write them, but mainly, I don't want to."

His friend and fellow composer Alexander Siloti learned of the Symphony's existence on a visit to Rachmaninoff's Dresden residence and, before Rachmaninoff could protest otherwise, informed the press of its St. Petersburg premiere. To one curious friend from St. Petersburg asking about the piece, a much-aggravated Rachmaninoff replied:

"A month ago, or more, I really did finish a symphony, but to this must be added the phrase "in rough draft." I have not announced it to "the world," because I want first to complete it in final form. While I was planning the orchestration, the work became terribly boring and repulsive to me. So I threw it aside and took up something else. Thus "the world" would not have known, yet, about my work – if it hadn't been for Siloti, who came here and pulled out of me news of everything I have done and of everything that I am going to do. I told him that there will be a symphony. That's how I've already received an invitation to conduct it next season! And news of this symphony has flown everywhere. I can tell you privately that I am displeased with the piece."

Critical Reception

Leaving aside his avowed displeasure, Rachmaninoff conducted the premiere in St. Petersburg on 26 January 1908. A week later he debuted the symphony in Moscow and then in Warsaw. All of the concerts were greeted with enthusiastic praise. The critic Yuli Engel wrote of the Moscow performance:

"[Rachmaninoff is] a worthy successor to Tchaikovsky...Successor, and not imitator, for he has already his own individuality. 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 sixty-five minutes forward.

This may be slightly overlong for the general audience, but how fresh, how beautiful it is!”

Rachmaninoff was vindicated as a symphonist. After the initial performances he arranged for publication and dedicated the score to his mentor and Tchaikovsky's pupil, the composer Sergei Taneyev.

Leery of its length, conductors have often subjected the symphony to extensive cuts. The most common is the excision of the entire recapitulation of the central theme from the Adagio. Other reductions work to shave off a few seconds here and there by removing measures of thematic repetition and accompaniment wherever possible, until the hour-long symphony is whittled down to a little over 30 minutes. While Rachmaninoff did not object to others' cuts, when he conducted the symphony he made none himself. The resurgence in popularity of the extravagant Romantic style has allowed modern performances to include the symphony in its entirety. Tonight's performance features the uncut symphony.

What to Listen For

The first movement's Largo introduction begins in the cellos and basses with a solemn motto theme that circles stepwise around the opening note before descending. In the tradition of late Romantic symphonies, particularly Tchaikovsky's, elaborations on this motto provide the basis for the rest of the movement and act as a unifying motif for the symphony. As the low strings hold their final note, the winds vary the opening. The first violins jump in with a mournful derivation of the motto theme that will dominate the first movement. The motto transforms and grows steadily, building and layering upon itself to a climax played by the full orchestra before it sinks to a rocking figure in the strings. Up until now the orchestration has remained lush even in the quietest sections, with a continuous wash of sound maintained below the melody. The textural contrast as the English horn is left to contemplate the motto theme alone is haunting.

The strings lead into the next section with a fragment of an ascending scale and the violins introduce a yearning, forward-pushing variation on the motto. The orchestra pushes forward and the music grows ever more complex, twisting upon itself in seemingly endless permutations. The intensity falls briefly for the solo violin to recall the Allegro's first theme before the strings rise in a flurry of notes and the tension begins to mount again. A series of climaxes builds until the orchestra crashes into a tempest of fragments from the first theme, then a more traditional reprisal of the second theme. Without pause, Rachmaninoff sweeps into a coda centered around an impassioned variation on the Allegro's first theme.

The Scherzo opens with a horn fanfare that recalls echoes of the *Dies irae* that Rachmaninoff incorporated in many of his works. The figure is seized and made impish by the strings. A romantic, singing melody carried in violins interrupts the movement's hectic momentum, but before they can linger too long the brass and winds intrude to guide the orchestra back to the first theme. The trio begins with a bang and the second violins launch into a *staccato* fugue. In the return of the first theme, the *Dies irae* suggested by the horns at the beginning of the movement becomes explicit. Twice the brass break into the coda to softly intone the motto theme, and the movement disintegrates into silence.

The violas begin the Adagio with a graceful upward sweep over which the violins play a lyrical *ritornello* of rising thirds. Above them rises the solo clarinet in an elegant melody that moves mostly by step, never straying far from the note on which it began. The rapturous violins carry it to greater emotional heights until they bring back the *ritornello* theme with which they began the movement. A variation on the plaintive theme that opened the

symphony returns and is passed between the strings and the solo winds. The full orchestra sings it and then trails off into silence, broken as the winds explore the phrase one by one. At last the sublime melody played by the clarinet in the opening returns in the violins. In the background, the winds sing the mournful motto theme. The rising thirds of the *ritornello* provide a peaceful, uplifting conclusion as the movement draws to an end.

The rambunctious opening of the Finale is derived from the spritely theme the violins played in the Scherzo. A multitude of variations of the motto theme from the earlier movements weave through a seething storm of triplets. The horns sound a blast and the rough-and-tumble energy of the first theme gives way to a march in the winds and brass, contrasted by the strings' lyric lines. The first theme returns briefly before a *cantabile* melody played by the entire string orchestra bursts through. A quote from the *adagio* takes center stage for just six measures before it is swept aside by the return of the high-speed tempo. In its place follow a tapestry of descending scales in every variation: diminutions and augmentations, *staccato* and *legato*, carried by every voice and growing every louder until it seems as if a multitude of bells were clamoring in celebration. The conventional recapitulation and coda that follow brings the symphony to a rousing close.

Biographical Sketch

Rachmaninoff was born to an aristocratic family on April 1, 1873 in Semyonovo, a countryside estate in northwestern Russia. He died of melanoma in 1943 in Beverly Hills, California. Despite the troubles that resulted from his family's debts, he was able to study piano and composition at the Moscow Conservatory. Even from this early stage, Rachmaninoff found that his dual vocations as performer and composer conflicted. After his one act opera *Aleko* won the Conservatory's rarely-awarded Gold Medal he confessed to Zverev, his piano teacher, that he wished to spend more time composing. Zverev cut off all contact with him.

The trend would continue throughout his life. Bursts of creativity would alternate with long stretches of silence. After the First Symphony's disastrous reception he ceased composing and concentrated his attentions on conducting, first at the Moscow Private Russian Opera Company and later at the Bolshoi Theater. In 1906 he ceased conducting almost entirely to focus on composing. During this period he produced some of his most enduring works, including the Second Symphony, *The Bells*, the tone poem *The Isle of the Dead*, and the Piano Concerto No. 3, which served as his musical calling card when he went on his first tour of the United States in 1909. The successful tour provided the key to his continued security when the Russian Revolution of 1917 forced him to flee his native country. He moved to New York and set his composition aside to focus on his more lucrative career as a concert pianist. He didn't resume composing in earnest until the construction of the Villa Senar, his summer home on Lake Lucerne in Switzerland, in 1934. Summering in Europe seemed to return his inspiration, resulting in the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Third Symphony, and his last completed work, the *Symphonic Dances*.

Context: Other Events of 1908

- A ball signifying New Year's Day drops in New York City for the first time
- Olivier Messiaen born
- Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov dies
- Japanese immigration to the U.S.A. is forbidden
- A long-distance radio message is sent from the Eiffel Tower for the first time