Sergey Rachmaninov (1873–1943)
Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27 • Vocalise, Op. 34, No. 14

The Russian composer and pianist Sergey Rachmaninov was born in 1873, the son of aristocratic parents. His father’s improvidence, however, led to a change in the fortunes of the family when increasing debts necessitated the sale of one estate after another, followed by removal to an apartment in St Petersburg. It was there that Rachmaninov, at the age of nine, entered the Conservatory on a scholarship. The subsequent separation of his parents and his own failure in general subject examinations brought about his move to Moscow, where he was accepted as a pupil of Nikolay Zverev, a pupil of John Field’s pupil Dubucque and of Adolf von Henselt. Rachmaninov lodged in Zverev’s house, where the necessary discipline was instilled, providing him with the basis of a subsequently formidable technique. In 1888, he entered the Conservatory as a pupil of his cousin Alexander Ziloti, a former pupil of Zverev and later of Liszt. Rachmaninov’s other teachers at the Conservatory were Sergey Taneyev, a former pupil of Nikolay Rubinstein and Tchaikovsky, with whom he studied counterpoint, and Rimsky-Korsakov’s former pupil Anton Arensky, Rachmaninov’s teacher for fugue, harmony and free composition. In Moscow, as time went on, he won considerable success, both as a performer and as a composer, after graduating in the piano class of the Conservatory in 1891 and in composition the following year.

The Revolution of 1917 brought many changes. While some musicians remained in Russia, others chose temporary or permanent exile abroad. Rachmaninov took the latter course and thereafter found himself obliged to rely on his remarkable gifts as a pianist to support himself and his family, at the same time continuing his work as a conductor. Composition inevitably had to take second place and it was principally as a pianist, one of the greatest of his time, that he became known to audiences. Concert-tours in America proved lucrative and he established a publishing enterprise in Paris, where he lived for some time, before having a house built for himself and his family at Hertenstein, near Lucerne. In 1939 he left Europe, finally settling in Beverly Hills, California, where he died in 1943.

Among the most popular of Rachmaninov’s shorter works is the Vocalise, Op. 34, No. 14, its final version dated 21 September 1915. Originally, as its title suggests, a wordless song, the last of a set of fourteen songs, the piece has appeared in various guises, including, as here, in the arrangement for orchestra made by the composer.

Rachmaninov’s Symphony No. 1 in D minor, Op. 13 (1895), his second attempt at the form, had proved a great disappointment. At its first performance two years later in St Petersburg, with the encouragement of the publisher and now most effective patron of Russian music, Belyayev, the work was conducted badly by Glazunov, allegedly drunk at the time, and was savagely reviewed by César Cui, who described it as a student attempt to depict in music the seven plagues of Egypt. This public failure, after earlier success with his First Piano Concerto (1892) and Morceaux de Fantaisie (1892), which includes the famous Prelude in C sharp minor, diverted Rachmaninov from composition and he took a position as conductor with the Mamontov Opera, apparently unable to return to composition. It was a successful course of hypnotherapy with Dr Nikolay Dahl in the first months of 1900 that brought a measure of relief and his first work on a second piano concerto, dedicated to Dr Dahl and completed and performed the following year.

A new symphony had been promised Alexander Ziloti, now conductor of the Moscow Philharmonic Society concerts, as early as 1902. In October 1906 Rachmaninov settled in Dresden, returning for the summer to Ivanovka, an estate belonging to his wife’s family that he later purchased. The symphony was sketched out in rough by 1907 and during the summer he set to work on the orchestration. The work went slowly and the symphony was only completed in January 1908, to be performed successfully in St Petersburg under the composer’s direction towards the end of the same month, as part of a concert season under Ziloti. Its American première was given in January 1909 by Leonard Slatkin’s great-uncle, Modeste Altschuler, with the Russian Symphony Orchestra of New York. The symphony was dedicated to Sergey Taneyev.
Rachmaninov’s Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27, is an extended work, dominated by strong lyrical feeling that has brought it a high degree of popularity. Underlying the work is the composer’s recurrent idée fixe, the Dies irae, the sequence of the Latin Requiem Mass, a musical allusion to death at least since its use by Berlioz in 1830. The symphony starts with a slow introduction and a motto motif heard first in the lower strings. The step-wise outline of the motif suggests the melodic outline of much of the material that is to follow. A cor anglais leads to the main body of the movement, a sonata-allegro in which the first subject, in E minor, expanded in the central development, leads to a more lyrical G major second subject, which, in turn, forms the substance of the recapitulation. The C major second movement Scherzo, skilfully orchestrated, has a molto cantabile secondary theme and a central fugato introduced by the second violins, followed by the first and then the violas, developed before the recapitulation. The A major third movement, the epitome of romantic longing, is introduced by a violin theme that leads to an extended clarinet melody. This last is to return with the first violins and an accompanying use of the first theme, which finally triumphs, followed by an allusion to the opening motif of the symphony. The last movement starts with a vigorous dance, leading to a secondary theme that suggests and then directly quotes the opening of the slow movement. The first theme is developed in a more sinister dance, with accompanying hints of the Dies irae and references to the opening motif. The second theme is heard again before the emphatic closing section.

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