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Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943)
Symphony No.1 in D minor, Op.13
Isle of the Dead (symphonic poem) Op. 29

USSR State Symphony Orchestra
Evgeni Svetlanov

Symphony No. 1

[1]	<i>Grave. Allegro ma non troppo</i>	14:21
[2]	<i>Allegro animato</i>	8:20
[3]	<i>Larghetto</i>	12:16
[4]	<i>Allegro con fuoco</i>	12:41

Isle of the Dead

[5]	Symphonic poem inspired by A. Boecklin's painting	20:30
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Total 68:10

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Rachmaninov began his *First Symphony* in January 1895 and completed the scoring eight months later. It is very much the work of an angry young man which, in its fierce passion, owes a considerable debt to Tchaikovsky at his most feverish. The lyricism of the third movement however points the way forward to Rachmaninov's later works. Much of the original material appears during the first movement and older listeners will doubtless recognise the rhythmic 'TV' theme that occurs shortly after the beginning of the finale.

In the year following the work's completion, the wealthy patron Belyayev agreed to sponsor its premiere at one of his series of Symphony concerts and accordingly the first performance took place in March 1897 in St Petersburg. The performance was a shambles: Rachmaninov's wife was of the opinion that Glazunov, who conducted the disastrous premiere, was drunk at the time. This accusation was not fully accepted by the composer himself, although two months after the premiere Rachmaninov called Glazunov's musicianship into question in a letter to his friend Alexander Zatayevich. There may have been a grain of truth to Mrs Rachmaninov's assertions: having suffered a crisis of self-confidence in 1890, Glazunov had become increasingly dependant on alcohol; his solitary nocturnal binges were notorious as was the length of rubber tubing which gave him ready access to a bottle of vodka hidden in his desk at the Conservatory.

Although Rachmaninov received his early musical education in St Petersburg in 1882, from 1885 he had studied in Moscow. In 1888 he took piano lessons with Ziloti at the Moscow Conservatory and at the same time entered Arensky's and Taneyev's classes in counterpoint and harmony. Tension and rivalry in musical circles between St Petersburg and Moscow undoubtedly contributed to the negative critical reaction to Rachmaninov's *First Symphony*. Typical of this critical opprobrium was César Cui's legendary review published in the St Petersburg journal *Novosti i birzhvaya*: 'If Hell had a Conservatory and if one of its brightest students were told to compose a work based upon The Seven Plagues of Egypt, then he need only compose a symphony like Rachmaninov's; the task would be fulfilled brilliantly and Hell's citizens would be delighted. But since we are still living on Earth, this music has a depressing effect' (March 1897).

Cui listed the reasons why he found the work depressing: broken rhythms, vagueness of form, meaningless repetition, complete lack of orchestration technique and thematic content and 'sickly, perverse harmonization'. Rachmaninov was devastated and for the following few years gave up

composition entirely, concentrating instead on his other careers: conducting and piano. After treatment from the hypnotist Nikolay Dahl, Rachmaninov returned to composition with his *Second Piano Concerto* (1900/01).

Some 20 years later Rachmaninov found himself agreeing with the gist of Cui's criticism, admitting there was much that was 'weak, childish, bombastic and... badly orchestrated'. But he also drew attention to the fine works that failed first time round and the greater number of bad works that had been initially well-received. The *First Symphony* was never again played in Rachmaninov's lifetime. He considered revising it in 1908 but refused to allow further performances. In 1944 (the year after Rachmaninov's death in Beverly Hills, California) the orchestral parts were found in the Leningrad Conservatory by the musicologist Alexander Ossovsky. Its second performance was under Alexander Gauk in Moscow on 17 October 1945.

At the time of his *Second Symphony* (composed 1906/7) Rachmaninov announced his intention to compose a symphonic poem but he lacked a subject for inspiration. After considerable searching, Rachmaninov chanced upon a black and white print of the Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin's painting *The Isle of the Dead*. Böcklin's (1827-1901) craggy island with its unnaturally high cypresses has in its centre Charon rowing a departed soul towards the gateway to the underworld. This doom-laden scenario was meat and drink to Rachmaninov's typically Russian temperament. He later recalled that the 'massive architecture and the mystic message of the painting made a marked impression on me, and the tone poem was the result'.

This painting inspired what is surely Rachmaninov's orchestral masterpiece for nowhere else does this most emotive of composers exhibit his innermost feelings so graphically. To deep bell-like tones Charon draws his passenger across the Styx over a rocking 5/8 accompaniment in the lower strings. As the first of many climaxes approaches we hear a descending, sighing passage from the violins as though the soul is lamenting his fate. A sunnier theme, the 'life motto' as Rachmaninov termed it, follows where the soul looks back across the Styx at life and the pleasures left behind. At its ecstatic height, Rachmaninov casts a shadow over the music as the soul realises with immense regret that there is no turning back. Following another shattering climax, the luckless passenger is deposited on the shores of the island and we hear the grim tones of the *Dies irae*. A subdued version of the 'life motto' calls out plaintively but, to the rocking 5/8 rhythm, the unhearing, unfeeling Charon is already returning to the opposite shore.

Rachmaninov's score is dated one day before the actual premiere in 1909 which suggests that he made alterations up to the 11th hour. He was clearly pleased with the result since he conducted it at every available opportunity. During his American tour of 1909/10 it shared the programme with his *Second Symphony* and Mussorgsky's equally sinister *Night on Bald Mountain*.

Evgeny Svetlanov, one of the best-known Russian conductors of all time, was born in 1928 and having studied at the Gnessin School and later at the Moscow Conservatory under Shaporin and Alexander Gauk, he became chief conductor of the Moscow Radio Orchestra in 1953. The following year he took up an important post on the musical staff of the Bolshoy Theatre, becoming its Musical Director in 1962 and touring Europe in 1964. From 1965 he worked with the USSR State Symphony Orchestra and later guest conducted with a number of Western orchestras including the Philharmonia. He was also a composer. Svetlanov's many recordings include standard versions of much of the late 19th and 20th centuries' repertoire and he might be said to be at his finest with colourful and exotically scored works such. He died in 2002.

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Project Co-ordinator: Robin Vaughan (musicalmerit@blueyonder.co.uk)

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