

RACHMANINOV

Symphony No. 2 in E minor,
Op. 27

USSR State Symphony Orchestra
Evgeny SVETLANOV



Sergei Rachmaninov
Symphony No. 2 in e minor, Op. 27

1	I. Largo – Allegro moderato	18:11
2	II. Allegro molto	9:13
3	III. Adagio	15:40
4	IV. Allegro vivace	10:58

USSR State Symphony Orchestra
Evgeny Svetlanov, conductor

Recorded in 1968

Original producer and engineer uncredited

Edited by **Larisa Abelyan**

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NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943) was born in Semyonov near Novgorod into a family that, due to his father Vasily's prodigality, saw considerable wealth slip through their fingers. In 1881 Vasily was forced to sell Oleg, his last remaining estate, and moved his family into a small apartment in St Petersburg, where a diphtheria epidemic resulted in the death of Rachmaninov's sister. Doubtless feeling that this might never have happened if they had not been forced to move, Rachmaninov's mother held Vasily responsible for the family tragedy and he left home.

As a boy, Rachmaninov had developed into a fine pianist, and hence he was enrolled into the St Petersburg Conservatory in 1882; however due to his immature attitude to learning he was threatened with expulsion. His cousin Ziloti paved the way for his admittance to the Moscow Conservatory in the autumn of 1885 where Rachmaninov was taught by Nikolay Zverev, in whose apartment he lived along with other impoverished music students. He was well looked after by the cultured Zverev but he and his colleagues were subjected to a strict daily regime of piano practice. In 1886 he transcribed Tchaikovsky's *Manfred Symphony* for piano and the following year composed the brief *Scherzo in D minor* which remains his earliest surviving orchestral piece. Its style

has been compared to Mendelssohn. However Zverev became irritated by Rachmaninov's desire to compose and the student was obliged to live elsewhere. Whilst at the Moscow Conservatory Rachmaninov took lessons in counterpoint from Taneyev, resumed piano studies under Ziloti (who had joined the staff of the Conservatory), and joined Arensky's harmony and composition classes. Before his graduation in 1892 he had completed his *First Piano Concerto* and the one-act opera *Aleko*.

Later, following the 1905 Russian Revolution, Rachmaninov completed the preparation of his operas *The Miserly Knight* and *Francesca da Rimini* for production at Moscow's Bolshoy Opera (where he was also employed as a conductor) and then took his wife and young daughter to Dresden. There they remained for the next few years, returning to their Russian family home for the summer holidays. He chose Dresden as his refuge from the tumultuous events in Russia because of his admiration for the opera company under Ernst von Schuch and also for its proximity to Leipzig, and therefore the Gewandhaus orchestra where Nikisch (who had tirelessly promoted Rachmaninov's work in the past) was conductor.

It seems probable that Rachmaninov was keen to erase the dreadful memories of the debacle surrounding his *First Symphony* of 1897 (he had entrusted the work to Glazunov, only to hear him murder it) and a new Rachmaninov symphony was announced in 1902. It is not clear how much of the work was composed at this time, but at the beginning of 1907 Rachmaninov wrote that he had completed the new work in draft but had not the inclination to orchestrate it. He began to do so in July 1907 but found the work tiring: the first movement took three months to complete, the scherzo second movement three and half weeks, the adagio slow movement took two weeks and a month was needed to complete the finale.

Rachmaninov conducted the premiere himself in January 1908 in St Petersburg. A critic present at the Moscow premiere of the *Second Symphony* the following week commented that although the symphony lasted over an hour, the time had passed pleasantly quickly. 'How fresh, how beautiful it is,' he exclaimed. However it became the custom to perform the work with damaging cuts – 'like cutting a piece out of my heart' bemoaned the composer – and many conductors continue to do so, although it is now usually performed complete. Always popular with

concert audiences, the *Second Symphony* is a supreme example of what Maes calls Rachmaninov's 'spontaneous lyricism...hand in hand with motivic unity'.*

In this, as with so much of his work, the *Dies Irae* is quoted (it reappears throughout the symphony, most clearly in the second movement and was further used by this fatalistic composer in *The Isle of the Dead*, *Paganini Rhapsody*, *Cello Sonata*, *Vocalise* and in his *First Piano Sonata*). The sombre and sinuous first movement which suggests barely suppressed passion is the section that Rachmaninov found most difficult to orchestrate. In contrast the invigorating Scherzo movement hints at the open air with echoes of the parade ground. The lovely third movement contains one of Rachmaninov's most voluptuous seamless melodies played by the solo clarinet with assistance from the luscious string section. The climax repeats the opening phrase of the symphony, now barely recognisable from its previous sombre tones. For the finale Rachmaninov treats us to an exuberant festive dance, sumptuously scored; elsewhere the second theme is another lengthy melody and key motifs from previous movements are reintroduced before the triumphant concluding bars.

In time Rachmaninov was able to divide his time equally to composition, piano playing and conducting. In the spring of 1912, having completed his season's performing duties, he returned to his estate Ivanovka to work on some songs, setting texts by a variety of poets sent him by a close friend Marietta Shaginyan. The resulting songs were dedicated to singer friends: Chaliapin, Sobinov, and Nezhdanova. Antonina Nezhdanova was the recipient of the last song *Vocalise*, (sources vary as to the completion date – from April 1912 to April 1915, the completed score being signed 21 September 1915). It is thought that the *Dies Irae* quotation is a reference to the appalling loss of life in the opening months of the First World War. One should also mention that Rachmaninov was shaken by the deaths of both Scriabin and Taneyev in 1915. His friend Nikolay Struve suggested that Rachmaninov orchestrate *Vocalise* and this orchestration was recorded by the composer in 1929.

* *History of Russian Music* (University of California Press 2002)

NOTES ON THE ARTIST

The conductor **Evgeny Svetlanov** (1928–2002) was the unsurpassed authority on Russian Romantic orchestral music in the last decades of the 20th century.

From 1965 until 2000, Svetlanov conducted the USSR State Symphony Orchestra, and recorded an extensive catalogue of Russian music, amassing the largest recorded legacy of any Russian conductor. At one point Svetlanov even claimed to have recorded "absolutely all the Russian symphonic music that has ever been written."

Svetlanov initially trained as a pianist and was also active as a composer throughout his career. From 1955, he conducted at the Bolshoi Theatre, and established a reputation for dramatic readings of Russian operas, always to high musical standards.

At the time of his appointment to the USSR State Symphony Orchestra, he had already worked with them for ten years, and the collaboration was an enduring success. Svetlanov was able to establish a leading international profile for the orchestra through extensive touring. By the 1980s, Svetlanov had also established significant connections with several Western orchestras leading to appointments with the London Symphony Orchestra, Residentie Orchestra and the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra.

In 2000, Svetlanov was controversially sacked from his Moscow appointment by the Russian culture minister, Mikhail Shvydkoi, who cited the excessive time that the conductor was spending with foreign orchestras. However, three years after his death, the orchestra was renamed in the conductor's honour, and is known today as the State Academic Symphony Orchestra 'Evgeny Svetlanov'.

James Murray

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