

Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Sergei Rachmaninoff was very nearly undone by the violent and mean-spirited criticism that greeted his First Symphony, unveiled in 1897 — so much so that for the next three years he didn't write a note. He worried that perhaps he was not cut out to be a composer after all; and yet, quite a few others had not judged him to be without talent. At first he had not been a standout at the Moscow Conservatory, but by the time he graduated, in 1892, he was deemed worthy of receiving the “Great Gold Medal” in composition, an honor that previously had been bestowed on only two students. Immediately following his graduation he had been signed to a publishing contract, and one of his first published pieces — his Prelude in C-sharp minor for piano — had become an instant hit. Tchaikovsky himself had warmly applauded the premiere of Rachmaninoff's opera *Aleko* at the Bolshoi Theatre. But the premiere of Rachmaninoff's First Symphony was a disaster of Biblical proportions — a review by the elder composer César Cui had likened it to the seven plagues of Egypt all rolled into a single piece — and the fact that the performance was unquestionably sub-par (Alexander Glazunov, who conducted, was reputedly drunk at the podium) did little to dull the pain of the reviews.

Rachmaninoff's talent was such that, in the psychological aftermath of his embarrassing public failure, he simply turned to a different musical pursuit and for the next few years focused on conducting. Before long he also sought the help of Dr. Nikolai Dahl, a physician who was investigating psychological therapy through hypnosis. The composer visited him daily beginning in January 1900. By the end of that summer Rachmaninoff was getting back on track as a composer. He started with achievable projects — an a-cappella chorus,

a love duet for an opera — and then two movements of a piano concerto that had been on the back burner for several years; this last would grow into his Second Piano Concerto.

Finally he was rehabilitated, busily working on chamber music, choral compositions, piano pieces, and three further operas. By 1906 he felt ready to confront whatever compositional demons might still be lingering, and he embarked on another symphony. He had recently moved with his wife and daughter to Dresden: the weather was supposed to be better for the daughter's problematic health, and he was hoping to escape some of the constant social and professional pressures that accompanied his mounting celebrity.

In February 1907 he wrote to his friend Nikita Morozov in Russia:

IN SHORT

Born: April 1, 1873, in either Oneg or Semyonovo, Russia

Died: March 28, 1943, in Beverly Hills, California

Work composed: autumn 1906 to January 1908, in Dresden; dedicated to the composer Sergei Taneyev

World premiere: February 8, 1908, in St. Petersburg, with the composer conducting one of the “Siloti concerts”

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 12, 1911, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928)

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: February 7, 2015, David Zinman, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 62 minutes

A month ago, or more, I really did finish a symphony, but to this must be added the phrase “in draft.” I have not announced it to “the world,” because I want first to complete its final writing. While I was planning to put it in “clean” form, it became terribly boring and repulsive to me. So I threw it aside and took up something else.

Nonetheless, word was out, and Rachmaninoff promptly received an invitation to conduct it during the upcoming season —

before he was anywhere near finished polishing the piece. “I can tell you privately that I am displeased with it,” Rachmaninoff’s letter continued, “but that it really ‘will be,’ though not before autumn, as I shall not begin its orchestration until summer.”

That proved to be the case, and on August 2, he again wrote to Morozov:

For two weeks now I have been busy with the orchestration of the Symphony. The work proceeds very laboriously and sluggishly. It’s slow not only because of

Views and Reviews

Sergei Rachmaninoff conducted the first Moscow performance of his Second Symphony on February 14, 1908, a week after its World Premiere. On the same program he appeared as soloist in his Second Piano Concerto, and he was welcomed back to his homeland with enthusiasm. The critic Yuli Engel wrote:

After a year-and-a-half stay abroad Rachmaninoff again appears before the Moscow public as composer, conductor, and pianist. ... And Rachmaninoff is worth an entire concert devoted to his works. Despite his thirty-four years he is one of the most significant figures in the contemporary music world, a worthy successor to Tchaikovsky, if not in the dimensions of his talent (of which it is too early to speak), then certainly in its concentration, sincerity, and subjective delicacy. Successor, and not imitator, for he has already his own individuality.

This was confirmed most impressively by the new E-minor Symphony by Rachmaninoff. ... After listening with unflagging 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 in 1901

That Time and Place



In the years leading up to the Revolution of 1917, the arts in Russia were experiencing a remarkable heyday. Rachmaninoff's rich romanticism, following in the tradition of Tchaikovsky, represented only one strain in a strikingly varied musical culture. Within a year of his Symphony No. 2 would come works as diverse as Rimsky-Korsakov's fairy-tale opera *The Golden Cockerel* (1906–07), Stravinsky's career-launching showpiece *Fireworks* (1908), Scriabin's visionary and harmonically innovative *Poem of Ecstasy* (1905–08), and the young Prokofiev's unprecedentedly brutal *Suggestion diabolique* for piano (1908).

Meanwhile, the flourishing Russian visual arts included trends toward both realism and symbolism, as well as the wide-ranging movement named after the magazine *Mir iskusstva* (*The World of Art*), which took inspiration from folk and decorative arts. The magazine's editor, and the organizer of many of the group's influential exhibitions, was Serge Diaghilev, who would go on to use many of its artists as his designers when he established the Ballets Russes in Paris in 1909; these would include Léon Bakst, Alexandre Benois, and Nicholas Roerich.

— The Editors



From top: Léon Bakst's *Elisium* (1906); Nicholas Roerich's *Treasure of the Angels* (1905); Alexandre Benois's *Military Parade of Emperor Paul in front of Mikhailovsky Castle* (1907)

the instrumentation, which ordinarily comes to me with difficulty, but also because I left it in draft, and some movements are yet to be worked out.

Fortunately for posterity Rachmaninoff toughed it out, finally vindicating himself as a gifted symphonist. His Second Symphony scored a popular success, and in December

1908 the work was honored with a Glinka Award for symphonic composition.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, orchestra bells, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, and strings.

Angels and Muses

After the brutal rejection of his First Symphony in 1897, Rachmaninoff essentially stopped composing until he sought treatment from Dr. Nikolai Dahl, an internist who had closely followed the work that Jean-Martin Charcot was doing with hypnosis at Paris's Salpêtrière Hospital. He was a friend of Rachmaninoff's cousins, the Satins — it was in that branch of the family that Rachmaninoff would find his bride, Natalia Alexandrovna — and he had successfully cured the composer's aunt of a psychosomatic ailment. Dahl was also an excellent violist and the founder of his own string quartet.

Rachmaninoff began daily visits to Dahl in January 1900. The first aim was to improve his sleep and appetite. The larger goal was to enable him to compose again; Rachmaninoff had promised a piano concerto to Alexander Goldenweiser in 1898, and had promised the London Philharmonic Society to return with a new concerto in the 1899–1900 season. He did neither. Rachmaninoff later recalled in his memoirs:

Something within me snapped. All my self-confidence broke down. ... A paralyzing apathy possessed me. I did nothing at all and found no pleasure in anything. Half my days were spent on a couch sighing over my ruined life. My only occupation consisted in giving a few piano lessons in order to keep myself alive.

Dr. Dahl's treatment, a mixture of cultured conversation and hypnotic suggestion ("You will begin your concerto ... you will work with great ease ... the concerto will be excellent ..."), did its work. Almost immediately Rachmaninoff felt and looked better, and was soon ready to return to composition. He dedicated his Second Piano Concerto to Dahl.

— The Editors



Rachmaninoff (standing, second from left), vacationing with his Satin cousins, including his future bride, Natalia (seated, second from left), a few years before they would introduce him to Dr. Nikolai Dahl