

## ***Rachmaninoff and the Symphony***

by David Butler Cannata.

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Rachmaninoff studies, paradoxically for his great stature of composer and pianist, are not developed proportionally to popularity of his music. This can be explained first of all by his life having been torn between Russia, his homeland, and America, where he found refuge after coup d'état of 1917. The exile aggravated Rachmaninoff's ability to compose. Used to working in the romantic peacefulness of his estate Ivanovka, or in his most pleasant Moscow house, Rachmaninoff could hardly keep up creative work until building in 1933 villa "Senar" (abbreviation of Sergei and Natalie Rachmaninoff, on the Küsnachtersee, Switzerland) which provided him with necessary conditions for uninterrupted composition.

As it happened, Rachmaninoff's personal archive and manuscripts eventually found their way to the State Museum of Musical Culture in Moscow and the Library of Congress in Washington. Divided manuscripts, the existence of numerable revisions and editions based on different authorized versions (that also messed up the issue of copyright) constituted difficulty for scholars and brought grave hindrance in serious research into his oeuvre.

The presented book is a pioneering work, in many ways filling up the gap and providing a reliable infrastructure for further exploration. The author studied the sources most carefully, identified or re-identified many of them, made them break the silence and tell the story of Rachmaninoff's compositional process.

Modest in size, the book concentrates on symphonic works, barely touching anything else, even Rachmaninoff's piano concertos. It begins with a biographical chapter where the author focuses on three equally great facets of the musician's talent: composition, pianism and conducting as well as their interlacing in his life. Summarizing Rachmaninoff's activity before the emigration, Cannata observes that Rachmaninoff has exerted a unique influence in almost every sphere of Moscow musical life during 1892-1917.

The writer reflects on main circumstances surrounding Rachmaninoff's compositional work and denotes two events he sees as key moments. The first was the famous fiasco of Rachmaninoff's *First Symphony*, - the great crisis that caused him losing his self-confidence in composition. The second event, most important for Rachmaninoff as a composer, was 1906-1909 break down with his family in Dresden. During this time he devoted himself completely to composition and his newly found freedom allowed him to re-evaluate his compositional style. At that period Rachmaninoff composed the *Second Symphony* and the *Isle of the Dead*.

Quite vaguely Cannata mentions some intriguing circumstances around Rachmaninoff's relations with Soviets in later years of his emigration. However the author does not relate to circulating in Russia knowledge about Rachmaninoff's generous monetary support to Russia during the WWII; that condition has ended Rachmaninoff's prohibition there and allowed Russians to accept him as a great national composer.

In the same chapter Cannata gives a detailed account of sources he uses and analyzes documental evidences of the artistic influences that had major effect on Rachmaninoff: music of Liszt, Wagner and Tchaikovsky.

The second chapter "Working method" starts the fascinating journey into compositional process. First, the author carefully examines and classifies all kinds and

formats of music paper used by the composer for one work or another. It appears to be significant since even a type of paper and number of prepared bi-folios has already reflected his initial idea of the future composition. On the other hand, the study of paper has helped the scholar to detect the dates and attribute unclear fragments of composer's sketches. The sections on sketches, drafts, and legible manuscripts follow, each of them offering a lot to learn about Rachmaninoff's creative laboratory. As Cannata concludes at the end of the book, "the comprehensive nature of Rachmaninoff's drafts indicates that he had already focused the composition in mind before the drafting process. The miscellaneous sketches that precede these drafts were for him no more than *aides-mémoire*." (120) Rachmaninoff's "compositions were almost fully formed as early in the process as the draft stage. This indicates that he possessed a remarkable capability to manipulate the various musical perspectives... Invariably, his initial conception of any given work proved the most successful." (131)

Chapter 3 "Compositional development" considers the *First* (1895) and the *Second* (1907) symphonies, *Isle of the Dead* (1909) and *The Bells* (1913) to be all Russian-period scores. The area of Cannata's examination is the tonal strategy of Rachmaninoff's music. In his analysis the author often compares Rachmaninoff with Tchaikovsky, confirming that two composers have had much in common. However, Liszt's and Wagner's influences declared in the first chapter are not mentioned (except one small allusion (p. 70). The analysis allows the author to conclude that Rachmaninoff "composed each successive symphonic work faster and he was increasingly more satisfied with the end result. This is most apparent after he composed *Isle of the Dead*, the most important piece in his development as a creative artist". (132)

Chapter 4 "Revisions" based on the author's knowledge of compositional method is the climax of the study. Making an exception, Cannata reflects here on Rachmaninoff's *First piano concerto* Op. 1, 1891. The composer embarked on the revision of this early piece soon after fabulous success of his *Second concerto* (that marked his returning to composition after the crisis caused by his fiasco with the *First symphony* and his successful hypnotic treatment by Freud's student Dr. Nicolai Dahl). Subsequently he modified the *Second Symphony* and the *Isle of the Dead*. Exploring composer's method of revising Cannata found out that Rachmaninoff constantly re-instated cut out material he had excised earlier hoping for a quick improvement.

Finally the fifth chapter presents an essay on *The Third Symphony*. The author focuses on this work, seeing it as analogy to Tchaikovsky's *Patetique*, the masterpiece standing in zenith of the composer's oeuvre. The chapter opens with the detailed account of the sources, continues with tracing the conception of musical ideas and closes with the analysis of tonal structure.

The book is valuable and makes essential contribution to Rachmaninoff studies. Fundamental review of sources and detailed exploration of Rachmaninoff's compositional process elevates research in this field to the new level. It is also a fine methodological case-study of working with primary sources.

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