



Scolar Press

# RACHMANINOFF

COMPOSER · PIANIST · CONDUCTOR



Barrie Martyn

RACHMANINOFF

Composer, Pianist, Conductor

BARRIE MARTYN

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For Kate

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# Introduction

Like all Gaul, the musical life of Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninoff was divided into three parts: composer, pianist and conductor; so too this book. The first and main part considers Rachmaninoff's activity as a composer, with a chronological survey of his output; the second and third parts comprise materials concerning his careers as a virtuoso pianist and conductor. In 1930, reviewing his life's work with characteristic modesty and scepticism, Rachmaninoff remarked:

Today, when the greater part of my life is over, I am constantly troubled by the misgiving that, in venturing into too many fields, I may have failed to make the best use of my life. In the old Russian phrase, I have 'hunted three hares'. Can I be sure that I have caught one of them?

It is the author's contention that in each of his three careers Rachmaninoff not only caught his hare but achieved greatness.

Both as man and musician Rachmaninoff is a fascinating enigma and paradox, particularly for those of us in the West, where he spent the final twenty-five years of his life. During this time the enormous celebrity of his name as a composer reflected neither his reputation among generally hostile critics nor an admiring public's almost total unfamiliarity with most of his output. At the same time the place in musical history he seemed destined to be assigned alongside his country's nineteenth-century predecessors was manifestly irreconcilable with the chronology of the life of a man only one year older than Schönberg. In contrast with the extremes of emotion so powerfully and uninhibitedly expressed in his music, the private life that Rachmaninoff so carefully protected may now be seen, at least on the surface, to have been sober, even mundane, albeit with the trappings of material success and with endearing personal quirks, such as his typically twentieth-century passion for speed and the pleasure he evidently took in observing an intriguing game of poker or charades. Although in his music he wore his heart on his sleeve, except among intimates Rachmaninoff the man was always reserved, often aloof, sometimes unapproachable. Not only did his inscrutably impassive facial expression give nothing away about his inner feelings, but he lacked the vices of egotism and indiscretion that

might otherwise have broken down the barriers of reticence in his correspondence; even his wife never knew what he was composing, and this whole subject was taboo in the family circle. Although he had the world at his feet, the insecurity and self-doubt which had afflicted him near the beginning of his career after the traumatic failure of his First Symphony persisted not far below the surface throughout his life, belied by a towering physical presence and a commanding personality. At concerts he gave the impression of coming on to the stage only with the greatest reluctance and yet, at least in his later years, he used to declare that performing in public was his one satisfaction in life. No-one will ever know the price he must have paid for the battle within himself to present a front to the world that concealed his soul; the only clues are in the music, for it was here that Rachmaninoff expressed his innermost thoughts with absolute directness and sincerity.

In the years in which I grew up, immediately after World War II, Rachmaninoff perfectly epitomized the dichotomy of values that existed between the musical establishment and the concert-going public. While professional critics generally dismissed his music as second-rate and subversively reactionary, lay music lovers never ceased to respond enthusiastically to its powerful emotional appeal, finding in its continuance of nineteenth-century tradition an oasis in a desert of modernism. Since that time, with a wider and more representative cross-section of his output being heard in the concert hall and made available in recorded form, Rachmaninoff's popularity has steadily risen, and along with this has come a critical reappraisal and rehabilitation. Close intimacy with the composer increases rather than diminishes respect for his achievements; his music wears familiarity uncommonly well, as no art can without solid underlying virtues.

The reputation of Rachmaninoff the executant seems to have suffered the opposite fate to that of his music. Although his supremacy as a pianist was universally recognized during his lifetime, fashion in performance has changed so much since his death that the intrinsic merit of his art no less than the historical importance of his career both before the public and in the recording studio seems in danger of being neglected and unhonoured; it is here reasserted and examined in some detail. Rachmaninoff's work as a conductor, almost an unknown quantity in the West but a potent force for twenty years in his own country, has long since passed into forgotten history. It too, however, has been thought worth reconsidering here, not only for its inherent interest but also because his career and the repertoire he performed impinged on the central concern of Rachmaninoff's life – composition.

This Baedeker to Rachmaninoff is the product of one man's odyssey over many years. It makes no claim to be unprejudiced or nicely

balanced: I have emphasized the aspects of Rachmaninoff's music and music-making that specially interest me, hoping that the reader may share my enthusiasms. Thus, in analysing the music, I have made much of the relationship between different works, for although there was no dramatic change in the composer's style over a creative life of more than half a century, the marks of gradual evolution often point the way to later developments. I have also explored in some depth the matter of outside musical influences and the fascinating if thorny topic of the literary and pictorial stimuli, acknowledged or presumed, which seem to have played a significant part in Rachmaninoff's composing process. It has been my general intention to fill in the more conspicuous gaps left in previous studies; conversely I have deliberately passed as lightly as possible over ground already well trodden elsewhere, in particular paring mere biography to the minimum necessary to shed light on his musical life. In this regard, since its publication well over thirty years ago, the admirable biography by Bertensson and Leyda has not yet been significantly supplemented, still less supplanted, by any later account in English.

The main literary sources for the book are listed on pp. 563–4. In compiling material I have drawn heavily on Rachmaninoff's own writings, mainly and most profitably his correspondence but also his articles and interviews, disappointingly few and for the most part unrevealing though they were, and on the Soviet anthology of reminiscences about the man and the musician by his friends and colleagues. For the Russian years of Rachmaninoff's career many interesting details are to be found conveniently assembled in the two most important Soviet musicological studies of the composer, by Bryantseva and Keldish; for the final twenty-five years abroad most of the documentary evidence resides in the Rachmaninoff Archive in the Library of Congress in Washington, where the author spent happy and fruitful days examining the materials deposited there by the composer's wife in 1951 and brought into order by his faithful confidante and sister-in-law, Sophie Satin (Sofiya Alexandrovna Satina). Meeting and corresponding with Miss Satin herself, whose memory remained astoundingly clear even into advanced old age, was particularly useful for illuminating certain aspects of Rachmaninoff's life. For his unstinting help with matters relating to the unfinished opera *Monna Vanna* I should like to place on record my special gratitude to Mr Igor Buketoff, who has put all admirers of Rachmaninoff in his debt for rescuing this important work from oblivion and bringing it out into the light of day. Thanks are due also to Mr Brian Rust, without whose assistance the discography could not have been completed.

In the vexed matter of the transliteration of Russian names from Cyrillic script I have made no attempt to be perfectly consistent. In the

1880s, when the young Rachmaninoff (strictly transliterated 'Rakhmaninov') was taught French and so presumably also the form of his own name in Roman characters, and in the 1890s, when the composer's name appeared in both Cyrillic and Roman letters on his first published works, and in the first decades of the twentieth century, it was the convention in Europeanizing Russian names to aim at close phonetic approximation in French forms rather than strict literal correspondence. Thus a Russian final -v (pronounced 'f') was generally rendered by -ff, resulting in the spellings Taneyeff, Liadoff, Tchekhoff, etc. As the century progressed, however, the fashion began to retain the -v ending, which has now long since become the universal form (as in Gavrillov, Nureyev), and had Rachmaninoff lived in a later era he would doubtless have followed suit. The consonant in his name represented by 'kh', which to Western European eyes has the appearance of an outlandish barbarism, happens to correspond phonetically with the more approachable Teutonic 'ch' (a sound heard in the Scottish word 'loch'), which therefore looks and sounds right in its stead. In this book I have chosen to adopt the spelling of his name that Rachmaninoff himself used and in the case of other familiar personalities their current Europeanized versions; I have, however, transliterated unfamiliar names more strictly.

Like most Russian composers of his time, Rachmaninoff gave many of his compositions French titles, but although some of these, for example *Polichinelle* and the coinage *Étude-Tableau*, clearly need to remain in that form, others – *Trio élégiaque*, *Morceau de fantaisie*, etc. – like *Casse-noisette* and *Sacre du printemps* seem to me to have no greater resonance or import in French than their less pretentious English equivalents, and they have therefore generally been anglicized here. Rachmaninoff's songs I have referred to by their customary English titles. The translations of the texts themselves in the English edition range from the quaint to the desperate, and it is pleasing that they seem at last to have passed unobtrusively away through the almost universal use now of the originals. Where a musical illustration has a text, for Russian-less readers I have transliterated it and provided an English version. I have left Russian dating unchanged. The Julian calendar operated in Russia until a couple of months after Rachmaninoff had finally emigrated from his homeland, at the end of 1917, setting dates before this either twelve or thirteen days behind our own, according to whether they refer to the nineteenth or twentieth century.

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## Part I

# RACHMANINOFF

## THE COMPOSER



