RE-ENCOUNTERING RACHMANINOFF
by Joseph Horowitz


For decades, Rachmaninoff's abject intellectual disreputability seemingly required no comment. His popularity was held against him - music so easy to know and like, it was assumed, would become tedious. The century would outgrow Rachmaninoff. He would go away.

To mid-century modernists, originality, especially if influential, was a necessary criterion of personal genius. And the central task of original musical minds was to find an answer to spent Romanticism. Schoenberg and Stravinsky were seminal; for a time, Webern surpassed them in influence as he surpassed them in anti-Romantic rigor and concision. Debussy, who investigated non-Western music, and Bartok, who opted for unadulterated folk sources, were also esteemed for fashioning new compositional strategies.

And yet, a quarter century after Salzman's survey, Rachmaninoff is an expanding presence. Rather than being shunned for deficits in originality and influence, he is newly admired, and so are other twentieth century Romantics. In 1948 Virgil Thomson, in his debut review for the New York Herald-Tribune, could disparage Sibelius as "provincial beyond all description" - an opinion more quaint today than Sibelius ever was or will be. As recently as 1962, Glenn Gould could extol Richard Strauss as the twentieth century's "greatest musical figure" in an act of critical bravado; today, Gould's high regard for Strauss's post-1930 output is no longer heretical. Ravel - not a Romantic, but a composer whose irresistible surface allure disqualified him from greatness - is today appreciated, as never before, for his acute craftsmanship and sensibility. In fact, in retrospect it becomes apparent that Ravel, the later Strauss, and Sibelius all had something new to say.

Rachmaninoff, too, possessed a musical personality so strong he could not possibly have failed to create (however unfashionably) a voice of his own. And we have begun to listen to this voice with fascination and interest. When in 1997 the ubiquitous Third Piano Concert was attacked in The New York Times as "a cozy piece of schlock," an eminent musicologist, Joseph Kerman, rose to Rachmaninoff's defense in The New York Review of Books. "Novel, persuasive, expressive" is Kerman's shrewd revisionist verdict, surveying the structure of the concerto's vast and unconventional first movement.
Once it was the Second Concerto that identified Rachmaninoff. It turned up everywhere. Cunningly excerpted in David Lean's 1945 film Brief Encounter, it furnished an entire romantic soundtrack.

Lear's movie, based on a Noel Coward play, is of course a love story: a promiscuous affair that ends quietly, with the shaken wife returning to the unsuspecting husband. The black-and-white cinematography fixes on trains, fog, and rainy pavements. The music hypnotically deepens these images and events. The film is unthinkable without it.

It is significant that Brief Encounter unfolds as a series of flashbacks. Rachmaninoff's concerto is steeped in irredeemable melancholy and nostalgia. A comparison with Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto - in many respects Rachmaninoff's model - is revealing. In the slow movement, where Tchaikovsky is limpid (the theme is introduced by a flute), Rachmaninoff is cloudy and ensnared (the theme is a dusky clarinet tune). In faster music, where Tchaikovsky is panting and eager, Rachmaninoff is agitated but moody. In the climax - for which both composers inflate the finale's second theme - Tchaikovsky is wholesome and ecstatic. Rachmaninoff's C major coda, with its chromatic residue, retains C minor shadows; it is no more a happy ending than that of the romance portrayed in the film.

A more recent film mesmerized by Rachmaninoff is Shine (1996). This is no love story, but a harrowing account of a concert pianist's physical and mental decline, to which the strain of mastering Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto contributes. "Whatever you do, don't inflict Rachmaninoff on him; he's not ready," a teacher warns early on. The concerto, we are told, is a monster, monumentally taxing.

And it truly is. However fortuitously, Brief Encounter and Shine document a shift in the Rachmaninoff paradigm. Once defined by the Second Concerto, "Rachmaninoff" is now more identified with "Rach 3" - music more complex, more sophisticated, and more challenging. If it recapitulates the melancholic and nostalgic moods of its predecessor, they are here heroically magnified, intensified, disturbed. The Third Concerto is unimaginable as a backdrop to a love story. It is nothing if not the main event.

And there is more to expand our image of Rachmaninoff: symphonies, sonatas, songs, choral music, operas. His earlier celebrity as composer of the Second Concerto and C-sharp minor Prelude was that of a pianist who composed. We now more know him as a composer who, like Liszt, was also a master pianist.

He was born in Russia in 1873 and died in California in 1943. As a young man he composed prolifically. He finished his First Piano Concerto (subsequently revised) in 1891, while still a student at the Moscow Conservatory. Shortly after graduation came the C-sharp minor Prelude amidst a flood of songs, keyboard, and choral works, and the one-act opera Aleko.
But his First Symphony, his most ambitious work to date, failed disastrously in 1897, sabotaged by a poor performance and vicious reviews. Rachmaninoff sank into a depression and virtually stopped composing - but began a third career as a leading operatic conductor. His creative impasse was cured by Dr. Nikolai Dahl, who hypnotized him (a famous story). Then came the Second Piano Concerto (1900-1901) and a second floodtide in all genres, plus more conducting.

Russian political turmoil made Rachmaninoff a wanderer. He lived for a time in Dresden, and undertook his first American tour (1909). He left Russia for good in 1917 and eventually settled on Manhattan's Upper West Side, with a sometime summer residence in Locust Point, New Jersey. Later, a villa in Lucerne was his principal home. He again relocated to the United States in 1939, first in Orchard Point, Long Island, then Beverly Hills.

Rachmaninoff left Russia a famous composer, a major conductor, and a part-time pianist. He was offered music directorships in Boston and Cincinnati, but opted for the piano as a means for supporting his family. His conducting career ended (notwithstanding remarkable recordings of his Third Symphony, Isle of the Dead, and Vocalise with the Philadelphia Orchestra). As for Rachmaninoff the composer, he undertook no major projects in between the Op. 39 Etudes Tableaux of 1917 - his final Russian work - and the Fourth Piano Concerto of 1926. Restarted, the creative stream accelerated; his major late works include the Corelli Variations (1931), the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini (1934), the Third Symphony (1936; revised 1938), and the Symphonic Dances (1940).

Rachmaninoff's 26-year exile was profound. In the United States and Switzerland, he employed Russian servants and retained Russian customs. His sense of isolation must have been exacerbated by his incurable Romanticism; he inhabited a different musical world from his sometime compatriots Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich.

Doubtless these were factors in Rachmaninoff's diminished creative output after 1917. And it is notable that he abandoned writing operas and solo songs; subsequent to leaving Russia, he set Russian only once, for the choral Three Russian Songs of 1926. At the same time, there is another, more prosaic explanation for Rachmaninoff's lowered productivity. Once he decided to concentrate on being a pianist, he had to acquire a repertoire of concertos and recital programs. And he was a perfectionist, who practiced and prepared assiduously. If this pre-empted creative work, it is difficult to complain. Liszt and Anton Rubinstein left no recordings. Busoni left only a few. Rachmaninoff left many, and they beggar description. These recordings, moreover, not only document a pianistic genius never surpassed; they invaluably shed light on Rachmaninoff the composer.

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In a classic English-language study of Schubert's songs, Richard Capell writes unforgettably of the great Russian bass Feodor Chaliapin, one of Rachmaninoff’s closest friends, singing "Standchen" - outwardly, among the mildest of Schubert lieder: "How the song revives and
flowers in Chaliapin's art! Not to be forgotten is his [rendering] of 'Komm, beglücke mich' ['Come, delight me'] - wheedling, anticipative, irresistible."

Chopin's evergreen C-sharp minor Waltz, as recorded by Rachmaninoff in 1927, is an act of sorcery. The insinuating inflections, the majestic breadth of texture (abetted by additional notes in the left hand), the veiled, will-o'-the-wisp velocity of the piu mosso sections create a demonic vignette undreamt of by the composer; the innocent waltz becomes a tabula rasa upon which a sovereign pianist inscribes his art.

Rachmaninoff's protean personality (like Chaliapin's) seizes creative high ground; pianist and composer meet on equal footing. He is (like Chaliapin) a born Mephisto, a black magician; the notes are his clay.

Lamentably, Rachmaninoff left recordings of only two of the big solo works in his relatively small keyboard repertoire: Chopin's Funeral March Sonata (from 1930) and Schumann's Carnaval (1929). Both are among the most famous piano recordings ever made. In the Funeral March, he famously rewrites Chopin's dynamics, so that the march returns fortissimo, not piano (as written), after the central Trio. The entire movement is reconceived as an arch.

Even more remarkable (it seems to me) is a comparable adjustment to movement one. Rachmaninoff fixes on the galloping rhythm of the opening theme (here played with rare clarity and precision; many pianists misplace the accents and - following Chopin's own instructions - blur the rests with pedal). (In fact, the texture of this passage in Rachmaninoff's performance, with its stabbing left-hand accents and bone-dry articulation, is suggestively sinister, even macabre.) When the galloping theme returns in piano, sotto voce left-hand octaves at the beginning of the development section, Rachmaninoff renders them fortissimo: a thunderous, Cyclopean eruption. Afterward, the theme grows and rumbles, restless and implacable, in counterpoint with powers more benign. Still later, when Chopin instructs fortissimo, Rachmaninoff is soft; he has relocated the climax.

It is pure Mephisto. The vice-like grip of this pianist's musical intelligence partners Romantic freedom and passion. Intellect and feeling are placed at the service of incomparable technical command - power, precision, tone.

In his own music, Rachmaninoff is, again, an unsentimental Romantic, as ruthless as his convict's haircut and gimlet eyes. What sounds banal in other performances acquires majesty and sinew.

It is worth reflecting that Rachmaninoff's recordings come late in his compositional career. They postdate his departure from Russia and correlate with "late Rachmaninoff:" the music he composed after the hiatus of 1917-1926. He is falsely stereotyped as a composer who never changed - such works as the Fourth Piano Concerto and Variations on a Theme of Corelli abandon the trademark long melodies and "easy" moods. The Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, a model of compression, relents for a single big tune: the famous eighteenth
variation, which Rachmaninoff quipped he wrote "for my manager." The Fourth Concerto, Paganini Rhapsody, Symphonic Dances, and Third Symphony are also notable for a new virtuosity of instrumentation and orchestration - a logical extension of Rachmaninoff's exploration of tonal nuance and textural variety at the keyboard.

Of Rachmaninoff the man, Alexander and Katherine Swann, who knew him well in his years of exile, reminisced in 1944:

In spite of a deeply affectionate family, in spite of his great success all over the world, and the devotion of his audiences, Rachmaninoff lived shut within himself, alone in spirit, and everlastingly homesick for Russia. The Russian spirit and habits were all-powerful in him.

The Swanns also reported they "practically never saw him annoyed, displeased, fussing, or excited." His personal poise was awesome and implacable.

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Though we think first of Rachmaninoff as a composer for solo piano and for piano and orchestra, the genre in which he unquestionably reigns supreme is the Romantic repertoire for two keyboards in tandem – the topic of our Tuesday evening Rachmaninoff recital. That we are not more familiar with this repertoire reflects a late twentieth century eclipse of the two–piano team, once a flourishing attraction, now a collection of faded names: Vronsky and Babin, Gold and Fizdale, Bruk and Taimonov.

Our Tuesday night chronological survey of Rachmaninoff’s complete two-piano output, a rare event, encapsulates the composer’s evolution over half a century, culminating in a valedictory masterpiece: the Symphonic Dances. Our Wednesday night Rachmaninoff concert samples his extensive output for solo piano. Here, the major opuses are the two sonatas and – another late work contradicting the Rachmaninoff stereotypes -- the Corelli Variations. A third event features songs and chamber music. This year’s Gilmore Festival also includes the best- and least-known of Rachmaninoff’s major late works: the Variations on a Theme by Paganini and the Fourth piano Concerto. The full Rachmaninoff catalogue includes, as well, important religious choral works and three operas in addition to the symphonies and concertos. It all adds up to fuller, more formidable picture than any gleaned from Second Concerto or C-sharp minor Prelude, Brief Encounter or Shine – a picture of a composer still not fully discovered.