

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor--Sergei Rachmaninoff, piano; Leopold Stokowski, conductor; Philadelphia Orchestra (1929)

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Essay by David B. Cannata (guest post)*



Rachmaninoff



Original label



Stokowski

The genesis of Rachmaninoff's "Second Concerto" can be briefly told: the fiasco of his "First Symphony," Op. 13 (premiered March 1897), trounced the 28-year-old Rachmaninoff so much he "composed nothing for about three years." He noted in 1917 that, "I was like a man who had suffered a stroke, and had lost the use of his head and his hands." By 1900, the situation became so critical that his family sought the medical expertise of Moscow-based Freud-disciple Nicolai Dahl, and only after four months of daily treatments to restore self-confidence and rekindle creativity, the treatments, hypnotic or not, worked. As if at Dahl's behest we have Rachmaninoff's "Second Concerto." Whatever transpired, it's very hard to gainsay this incredible story when one notes the dedication of the piece, "A Monsieur N. Dahl."

The work comes in three highly integrated movements. Rachmaninoff marked the first simply, if ambiguously, "Moderato," crafting it as a taut structure, one with a short piano introduction (whose momentary, 8-measure, off-tonic ploy proves a crucial compositional reference throughout the work), but without orchestral exposition or cadenza for the soloist. For the second, the "Adagio sostenuto," Rachmaninoff reached back to an earlier composition for inspiration, embellishing music first used as a "Romance" for piano six-hands, music dated "20 September 1891." Only mid-point through this movement--that is mid-point through the work--do we hear at last a cadenza for the soloist, one that glances back to the tonal conundrum posed by the "Moderato's" introduction. Many find the final 15 measures of this movement particularly poignant, none more so than Rachmaninoff's own counterpoint teacher, Sergei Taneeff (1856-1915), who, upon first hearing this music, broke down in tears. As was Rachmaninoff's custom, he always saved the really pesky and most difficult music for the finale, here marked innocently "Allegro scherzando." The opening material refracts yet again the compositional riddle of the opening introduction, a puzzle only explained through the rigor of fugue mid-way through the movement. Always one to keep his musical options for continuation open to the very last moment (the finale is a masterpiece of formal

“checks and balances”), Rachmaninoff solved his tonal ploy only at the very last moment, that is immediately before the apotheosis of the final theme, after which comes a mad, scampering, hell-bent dash to the end.

Even for a work so well integrated, the premieres (plural!) gave rise to the speculation that Rachmaninoff composed the second and third movements before the first: only movements two and three were heard on 2 December 1900, with Rachmaninoff at the keyboard and his cousin and piano mentor, the Liszt pupil Alexander Siloti, conducting; all three movements were heard 10 months later, on 27 October 1901, with the same pairing. However, from both an analytical perspective, such as that noted above, and the physical structure of Rachmaninoff’s holograph full score, it is clear that the only reason movement two and three were given before that of the entire whole was that these were the movements to have performance materials, orchestral parts and the like, readied in time. Yet, this “double” premiere does tell us much concerning the forthcoming discussion. More anon.

In the early years of the 20th century, the “Second Concerto” became the mainstay of the composer’s own concertizing, second only in popularity to his “Prelude in C-sharp minor,” Op. 3/2. Yes, other pianists did take up the concerto, notably Ossip Gabrilowitsch and Raul Pugno; but principally it remained the property of the composer who, despite having the “Third Concerto” under his arm as he arrived in New York in 1909, played the “Second” ten times with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Max Fiedler as part of his American tour (1909-1910).

Arriving a refugee in New York in November 1918, ready to take up the burden of full-time professional concert touring, the “Second Concerto” was still the backbone of his repertoire. Thus, it is not surprising that it was the first of his concertos he brought into the recording studio--but with a singular musical wrinkle, a wrinkle already alluded to above, a wrinkle the composer finally was to iron out.

April 1929, it was some month: Louie Marx launched his take on the yo-yo, a toy that would make him millions; the Yankees became the first team to wear numbered uniforms; and the New York Stock Market slowly rallied from a mini crash, a blip that foreshadowed the catastrophic events of seven months later. And in April 1929, Rachmaninoff ventured into the recording studio to record *for posterity* his “Second Concerto” with The Philadelphia Orchestra under Stokowski. I say *for posterity*, because he already had a recording of the work in hand. An earlier effort with the same ensemble, although interesting for the latter-day musicologist, had proven problematic. Troubles beset this earlier project from the outset, not the least of which was its unusual recording schedule. All takes of movements two and three dated from 31 December 1923 and 3 January 1924; and these movements were subsequently made available on disc. But as strange as it may sound, and in a manner reminiscent of the premiere of the work, movement one was only laid down a year later, on 22 December 1924. Even though all recording was undertaken in the same acoustic (Trinity Church, Camden, NJ), Rachmaninoff was not happy with any of the 1924 work, and the first movement was not made available.

But two movements does not a Rachmaninoff concerto make.

And so, in April 1929, at the height of his powers, as this recording testifies, Rachmaninoff left us with his definitive “Second Concerto.” Recording the work took two days: the multiple takes for the first movement all date from Wednesday, 10 April; those for the second movement also date from the 10th, and additionally from Saturday the 13th; and all for the third movement date from the 13th. Stokowski did anything the composer requested. The orchestra did anything Stokowski indicated. And with but one microphone, some 30 feet above the ensemble in the Academy of Music in Philadelphia, Rachmaninoff recorded the work, leaving pianists since completely nonplussed as to his delivery. Most find his recording brisk at best, heartless at worst. Yet we have to remember that he was not troubled in any way by the busy-ness of finger work, or of carrying arm weight in *fortissimi* while still playing swiftly. Thus he was not confronted with the difficulties that beset most as they begin to learn the piece, one that, arguably, does not lie well under the hand, and one that often sets the solo line deep amidst the orchestral texture. Rather, Rachmaninoff could emphasize phrase and strophe, pointedly balancing exposition with recapitulation (as in the first movement), bringing the whole to a red-hot climax for the apotheosis of the finale.

Yes, some may still prefer Rubinstein’s noble 1956 reading with Reiner and the Chicago Symphony; or Richters’ masterly 1959 rendition with Sanderling and the Leningrad Philharmonic; or Graffman’s lithe 1964 interpretation with the New York Philharmonic under Bernstein at his best (ah! this conductor could balance the simplest orchestral sonority, rendering it simply arresting). But no matter what one thinks of Rachmaninoff’s 1929 interpretation, every pianist who opens the music and starts to learn the work has to reckon with the composer’s rendition. Are the first two movements too fast? No; after repeated hearings the structural integrity of the two coalesce into an elegant coupling. And while we all can but marvel at the technical ability of a pianist who can play the finale with such speed, though so much is lost even with the remastering of the work for modern technologies, it is mighty glib. Why so, we ask? Think of this: composed in 1900, and this was 1929; he had played the work multiple times over 30 concert seasons. Yes, he may have been tired of it, but some distance now existed between composition and recording, and as we know with some compositions that exist in multiple recordings, such as the “Serenade” Op. 3/5, things could slowly morph with time. And so we have the general rule: the closer his recording to the composition, the closer his rendition to the printed text.

This is not an essay on Rachmaninoff’s 1929 recording efforts, yet we cannot bypass the additional recording projects he sanctioned in this month. His work with the orchestra continued. On Monday 15 April and then on Saturday 20th he conducted the ensemble in a recording of his “Die Toteninsel” [“The Isle of the Dead”], Op. 29 (1909), a dazzling tone poem inspired by the Böcklin image of the same name, though here, in his haplessly truncated 1929 reading, one with excisions he subsequently—regrettably--always advocated. Also on the 20th, he conducted the Philadelphians in his orchestral transcription of his “Vocalise,” Op. 34/12.

April 1929, Rachmaninoff's "Mense Mirabilis": most of the recordings he made at this time came to fruition (such as this "Concerto" and his conducting the Philadelphians), but some he started, only to postpone (notably, his stunning version of Chopin's "Sonata in B-flat minor," Op. 35), and some he never sanctioned for release (despite the five takes for an acoustic recording of his Rimsky-Korsakoff transcription, "The Bumble Bee"). And in April 1929 Rachmaninoff also recorded his superb reading of Schumann's "Carnaval," Op. 9 ("Sphinxes" included). Already his interpretation was such that if he were to program it in any concert season, all other pianists deferred; little wonder that it has become the touchstone for all who followed. It may not always be as Schumann wrote it, but, as with this performance of the "Second Concerto," and, eventually, his recording of Chopin Op. 35, you *ain't* heard the piece until you've heard it played by Rachmaninoff.

So how was Rachmaninoff's pianism remembered? Robert Threlfall, dean of 20th-century Rachmaninoff studies, one who heard Rachmaninoff in concert 12 times, replied, unsurprisingly: "Yes, his playing was really that extraordinary. There was no one else who came close."

Surprisingly George Perle, Dean of 20th-century Berg studies, glowingly enthused: "His playing was like nothing else. Hearing him in concert those few times, they were some of the earliest and perhaps the greatest musical experiences of my life."

And that good-humored curmudgeon Milton Babbitt, mentor to so many composers active today, upon seeing the drafts for measures nine and following for the first movement, fair raved: "Oh look! Oh look, finally he got it right! And it is all there. Amazing! I must show this to my students." And he did.

April 1929--just routine for Rachmaninoff, the last of that rare *genus*, the pianist/composer/conductor.

Dr. David Cannata is an Associate Professor of Music at the Boyer College of Music and Dance at Temple University.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.