

Symphonic Dances, Op. 45

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Sergei Rachmaninoff was not at first a standout at the Moscow Conservatory, but by the time he graduated, in 1892, he was deemed worthy of receiving the Great Gold Medal, an honor that previously had been bestowed on only two students. For several years his career continued auspiciously, but in 1897 he was dealt a major setback with the failure of his First Symphony, which a prominent and dismissive review by the composer and critic César Cui likened to “a program symphony on the ‘Seven Plagues of Egypt’” that “would bring delight to the inhabitants of Hell.”

The distress threatened to undo Rachmaninoff, and for the next three years he didn’t write a note. In the psychological aftermath of this embarrassing fiasco, he turned to a different musical pursuit and focused on conducting. Before long he sought the help of a physician who was investigating psychological therapy through hypnosis, and by 1901 he was back on track as a composer. A few years later he would add the obligations of a touring concert pianist to his schedule, and Rachmaninoff’s numerous recordings reveal that his outstanding reputation as a performer was fully merited.

Success followed success for the next three and a half decades, but with the completion of his Third Symphony, in 1936, it appeared that Rachmaninoff had reached the end of his composing career. He had by then finished building a villa on the shore of Lake Lucerne, which he enjoyed traversing in his speedboat, and he was trying to rein in performing commitments so he could ease into retirement. However, the outbreak of World War II disrupted such plans and he decided to move with his family to the United States — familiar territory, since he had been largely resid-

ing in America since 1918. So it was that Rachmaninoff spent the summer of 1940 at an estate near Huntington, Long Island; and it was there that his final work, the Symphonic Dances, came into being.

His initial plan was to name the piece *Fantastic Dances*, which would have underscored their vibrant personality. Alternatively, he pondered titling the three movements “Noon,” “Twilight,” and “Midnight” — or, as his biographer Victor Seroff recounted the story, “Morning,” “Noon,” and “Evening,” meant as a metaphor for the three stages of human life. Rachmaninoff scrapped those ideas and settled instead on the more objective name of *Symphonic Dances*. The spirit of the dance does indeed inhabit this work, if in a sometimes mysterious or mournful way. As Rachmaninoff was completing the piece he played it privately for his

IN SHORT

Born: April 1, 1873, at Oneg, in the Novgorod region of Russia

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

Work composed: summer 1940; dedicated to Eugene Ormandy and The Philadelphia Orchestra

World premiere: January 3, 1941, at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia, by The Philadelphia Orchestra, Eugene Ormandy, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: December 17, 1942, Dmitri Mitropoulos, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: November 28, 2015, Ludovic Morlot, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 34 minutes

old friend Michel Fokine, the one-time choreographer of the Ballets Russes, who immediately signaled his interest in using it for a ballet. Regrettably, Fokine died in 1942 before he could make good on his intention.

Three dances make up this orchestral suite. The opening march-like movement is powerful and assertive, although with expressive contrast arriving in the middle section, in the form of very Russian-sounding wind writing. In the movement's coda the strings play a gorgeous new theme against the tintinnabulation of flute and piccolo, harp, piano, and orchestra bells. The theme has not been previously heard in this piece, but that doesn't mean it was actually new; Rachmaninoff borrowed it from his First

Symphony, which had come to grief so many years before. In reviving the theme, the composer seems to vindicate that early effort, if in a strictly private reference, since the First Symphony had remained unpublished and unperformed since its premiere.

A waltz follows, although more a melancholy, even oppressive Slavic waltz than a lilting Viennese one. To conclude, Rachmaninoff offers a finale that includes quotations from Russian Orthodox liturgical chants and from the Dies Irae of the Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead. Both would seem odd selections for what are, after all, identified as dances. But Rachmaninoff subsumes his borrowed material brilliantly into the general spirit of the Symphonic Dances, and

Listen for ... the Saxophone

Although not a standard member of the symphony orchestra, the saxophone had occasionally been pressed into service during the 19th and early 20th centuries as an “extra” instrument to intone passages of special color, with memorable examples being provided by Bizet (in his *L'Arlésienne* music) and Ravel (in his orchestration of Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*). Nonetheless, writing for saxophone was a new experience for Rachmaninoff when he composed *Symphonic Dances*. The instrument appears only in the first movement, for a fleeting but sensuous passage of three spacious phrases, beginning:



Rachmaninoff was worried about writing idiomatically for the alto saxophone and about notating the part indicated above, in the correct transposition for the instrument. So he turned to an expert, the composer-arranger Robert Russell Bennett, remembered today as the orchestrator for such Broadway hits as *Show Boat*, *Oklahoma!*, and *My Fair Lady*. Bennett recounted:

When he was doing his *Symphonic Dances*, he wanted to use a saxophone tone in the first movement and got in touch with me to advise him as to which of the saxophone family to use and just how to include it in his score — his experience with saxophones being extremely limited. ... Some days later we had luncheon together at his place in Huntington. When he met my wife and me at the railroad station he was driving the car and after about one hundred yards, he stopped the car, turned to me, and said “I start on A sharp?” I said “That’s right,” and he said “Right,” and drove on out to his place.

on the final page of the manuscript — the last he would ever complete — he inscribed, in Latin script, the word “Alliluya.”

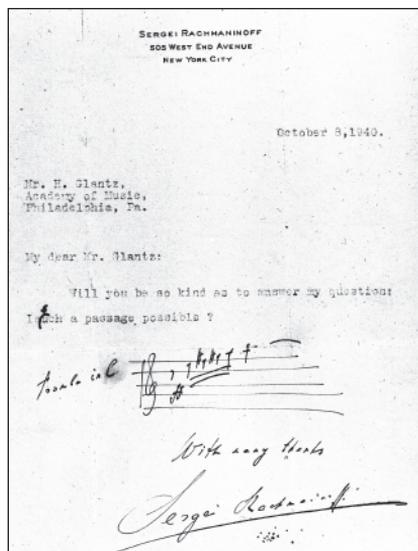
Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, three clarinets

(one doubling bass clarinet), alto saxophone, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, snare drum, orchestra bells, xylophone, tam-tam, chimes, cymbals, bass drum, harp, piano, and strings.

The New York Philharmonic Connection

It seems that the episode recounted by Robert Russell Bennett, in which Rachmaninoff consulted him on writing for the saxophone (see Listen for, page 35), wasn't the only time the Russian composer reached out to other musicians for advice about instrumentation. In 1940, then New York Philharmonic Principal Trumpet Harry Glantz was floored, and a bit perplexed, to receive a brief letter from Rachmaninoff, addressed from the composer's 505 West End Avenue apartment. Rachmaninoff had performed with the Philharmonic on numerous occasions dating back to 1910, when he made his debut performing his own Piano Concerto No. 3 under the baton of then Music Director Gustav Mahler. The composer apparently thought highly enough of Philharmonic musicians, based on their collaborations, to consult with the Principal Trumpet on a compositional matter. The short trumpet passage in question would be written into Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances*, his final opus and the only work he wrote, start to finish, in the United States.

— The Editors



Rachmaninoff's query, a gift to the New York Philharmonic Archives from Harry Glantz's daughter, Lois Rosenfield