

Prelude

“Inside Masterworks”



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MAY 2016

Masterworks #8:

Why did Rachmaninoff's composing career nearly end almost as soon as it began?



Vincent Van Gogh, Stephen King, J.K. Rowling, Charles Schultz, Wilbur and Orville Wright, Winston Churchill, Oprah Winfrey and countless others experienced repeated failures preceding ultimate success.

Some struggled to overcome depression following a painful rejection. But for Sergei Rachmaninoff, the public humiliation that accompanied the disastrous premier of his first symphony nearly ended the composer's career almost as soon as it began.

A gifted pianist, Sergei was awarded a scholarship to study music at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. The talented adolescent who never had to work hard, didn't bother to study and wound up failing most of his classes.ⁱ To prevent the waste of a great talent, Sergei's uncle, pianist Alexander Siloti, transferred his nephew to the Moscow Conservatory. Rachmaninoff was enrolled in the studio of Nikolai Zverev, whose study and practice regime was famously stringent, even bordering on abusive.ⁱⁱ The strict discipline worked. Sergei's talent blossomed, and while still a student, he composed the opera *Aleko* and the now-famous *Prelude in C Sharp Minor*.ⁱⁱⁱ Upon graduation in 1892, Rachmaninoff received the highest honor of the Great Gold Medal, which only two other students before him had received.^{iv} By 1897, when his First Symphony premiered, Rachmaninoff at age 24 was "the rising star" of the Russian music scene, with huge successes

as a pianist, conductor and composer. One imagines a young Rachmaninoff, who found everything easy, totally unprepared for rejection.

The premier remains one of the greatest disasters in music. Cesar Cui, a famous critic of the day, [and a member of "The Mighty Five", a dominant musician society that included Rimsky Korsakov and Alexander Borodin, which dictated the direction of Russian music], wrote a scathing review:

"If there were a conservatory in Hell, and if one of its talented students were to compose a ... symphony like Mr. Rachmaninoff's, then he would ... delight Hell's inhabitants."^v

And Mr. Cui didn't stop there: "... *this music leaves an evil impression with its broken rhythms ... vagueness of form, meaningless repetition... and above all its sickly perverse harmonization and... the complete absence of themes.*"^{vi}



After the performance, the audience was in turmoil.^{vii} Although today's historians have come to the conclusion that the "awful sounds" emanating from the stage were likely the result of inadequate rehearsal and the fact that the conductor, Alexander Glazunov, was drunk,^{viii} the effect on Rachmaninoff was immediate and devastating. He walked out in disgust before the end of the performance and fell into a deep depression.^{ix}

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Swearing never to write another symphony, Rachmaninoff even questioned whether he could ever compose again.^x Making matters worse, a marriage proposal to his cousin Natalia Satina was rejected in 1898 by the Russian Orthodox Church, which forbade marriages between cousins.^{xi} Around this time, Sergei's letters spoke of his intense agony and a plunging descent into a deep depression:



"Everything is going so badly, I'm afraid of falling ill by a seizure of black melancholy ... today I cried like an idiot.... I will die by the end of the season of black melancholy."^{xii}

At the end of 1899, Sergei was drinking so much that his hands shook uncontrollably, preventing him from even playing the piano.^{xiii} In letters to Tchaikovsky's brother, Modest (who wrote the librettos for his operas), Rachmaninoff confessed he had completely lost the ability to compose.^{xiv} For three years, the once-brilliant composer wrote nothing.

Sergei's mental health spiraled downward until a family intervention in 1900. Rachmaninoff's aunt referred him to Dr. Nikolai Dahl, a Moscow specialist in 'neuropsychotherapy.'^{xv} Rachmaninoff began a course of "auto-suggestive" therapy with Dahl, which included hypnosis; they met every day from January through April of 1900.^{xvi}

Rachmaninoff's recovery was a great success for psychotherapy; when Sergei, as the featured pianist, performed his Piano Concerto No. 2 in 1901 to wild acclaim, he dedicated the new concerto to Dahl in gratitude.^{xvii} Although the second piano concerto heralded his return to composition and public appearance, Rachmaninoff did not attempt a second symphony for another *five* years, finally beginning work in complete secrecy in 1906. The successful premier in January of 1908 marked his ultimate victory – and vindication – as a composer.



Do not miss the Hartford Symphony Orchestra in an all-Rachmaninoff program, **May 12 - 15, 2016**, including Symphony No. 2 in E Minor. Experience the glorious music of the composer whose intense emotions nearly cost him the ability to do what he loved most.

AND FOR EXTRA FUN:

Click this ink to Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto. Hearing the music's powerful emotional intensity, imagine Rachmaninoff's triumphant return as a performer and composer:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3c8Vj87JDC>



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The return of Casey's Classics

*Recommended recordings
for your listening pleasure!*

Curious about what you will be hearing on the concert program, or want to hear more? **Coleman Casey**, HSO's dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers the following recommendations for recordings of selections featured on our upcoming Masterworks Concert:

Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 1 receives an aristocratic performance from Krystian Zimerman and the Boston Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Ozawa (DG).

The same composer's Symphony No. 2 gets the outing of its life in a lush romantic performance from the London Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Genady Roshdestvensky in digital sound of remarkable amplitude (ALTO).

- i. Martyn, Barrie. Rachmaninoff. Aldershot, England. Scolar Press, 1990.
- ii. Ibid
- iii. Ibid
- iv. Ibid
- v. Woo, Brent, "Letters from Sergei Rachmaninoff: Substantiating a Context for His Depression in 1987-1900." UCLA, University of California, Los Angeles. UCLA. Web. 05 Aug. 2015
- vi. Tom Service, Music as Alchemy: Journeys with Great Conductors and their Orchestras, London: Faber and Faber, Ltd. 2012.
- vii. Francis Maes, A History of Russian Music, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002.
- viii. Woo, Brent, "Letters from Sergei Rachmaninoff: Substantiating a Context for His Depression in 1987-1900." UCLA, University of California, Los Angeles. UCLA. Web. 05 Aug. 2015
- ix. Ibid
- x. Bos, Carole, Rachmaninoff- Concerto No. 2 in C Minor and its Creation, AwesomeStories.com, Web. 04 Aug. 2015.
- xi. Ibid
- xii. Ibid
- xiii. Supra
- xiv. Woo, Brent, "Letters from Sergei Rachmaninoff: Substantiating a Context for His Depression in 1987-1900." UCLA, University of California, Los Angeles. UCLA. Web. 05 Aug. 2015
- xv. Ibid
- xvi. Ibid
- xvii. Ibid