

REMEMBERING RACHMANINOFF

by John C. Tibbetts

Sergei Rachmaninoff stalked across the concert platform. Warily, he paused at the piano, his pale, mournful face looming high above it like a moon. Then, after a curt bow to the audience, he folded his gaunt body into the instrument, dandled the keyboard in his massive hands as if it were a toy, and began to play. Not a muscle, not a twitch agitated that gloomy, wailing wall of a face. All the while, the music rippled and soared--electric, quick, and vital. . . .

Today, fifty years after his death, on March 28, 1943, Rachmaninoff remains a striking and enigmatic figure. He was, in the words of Igor Stravinsky, a "six-and-a-half-foot scowl."

"Presence was the magic word," recalls Henry Z. Steinway, elder statesman of Steinway and Sons. "He had a stage personality which was extraordinary. That tall form and that sad face. He always looked terribly unhappy. It was baffling. But there was also something very commanding that got across the footlights."

Pianist Rosalyn Tureck was twenty years old when she heard him play his Second Concerto at the Philadelphia Academy of Music. "I was terribly excited about that. Imagine, I had been playing that Concerto with Mitropoulos and the Chicago Symphony and now I had the thrill of hearing Rachmaninoff play it himself! When he walked out on stage, he wore this very closely cropped hair and you felt only a hardness and severity in his personality.

Later I went backstage and shook hands with him. And I shall never forget that physical sensation. His hands were so large that my hand got lost! He was very tall, thin, and had a very bony kind of visage. But that hand!--he had those cushions in his fingers--my own hand got lost in his. He had such a soft hand and sweet face and sweet smile. That moment is just as vivid now as it was then."

For pianist Eugene Istomin, the image of Rachmaninoff is a vivid part of his earliest memories. "I played for him when I was seven years old," says Istomin, who had been taken to him by Kyriena Siloti, the daughter of Rachmaninoff's teacher and cousin, Alexander Siloti (Siloti had taught piano performance to the young Rachmaninoff in the Moscow Conservatory in 1895). "Rachmaninoff had an apartment in West End Avenue in New York City at the time. It must have been 1931, or 1932. He did what anybody would do in those circumstances. He kissed me on the forehead. Then he said to Kyriena, 'He is musical, but are you doing something about his technique?' He had this kind of hair-brush head of dark brown hair. His face was all creased, like parchment. He looked like a convict. He was so big, so large, that the keyboard looked like a little checkerboard in front of him. I wasn't frightened at how he looked, but I was impressed."

Considering how much rhythmic vitality and digital velocity Rachmaninoff threw into his

performances, it is surprising how calmly and methodically he approached the keyboard. Not for nothing did he earn the sobriquet, the "Puritan of Pianists."

"At the keyboard he hardly seemed to move a muscle," says former New York Times music critic Harold C. Schonberg. "I heard him play in eight or nine recitals and for a couple of orchestral appearances. I don't think there's any question that he was one of the half dozen great pianists of history. No, I'll go further. He was the perfect pianist, *san pareil, san raproche*. He was absolutely perfect, flawless, an aristocrat with a high sense of drama and an extraordinary sense of poetry. And he could convey this extraordinary charisma with so little effort. But this golden sound came out of those perfectly programmed fingers. I don't think I ever heard him make a mistake."

Listening to his recordings today, one is struck by the breathless speed of those ten fingers. "He played his works much faster than anyone plays them today," says Istomin. "His fingers were like quicksilver, and he had this sort of rhythmic impetus, like a series of little electric shocks. But when the big tunes came, his tone had a gorgeous beauty and subtlety of phrasing." That soft touch may surprise those who think the Romantic tradition from which Rachmaninoff sprang consisted of leonine virtuosos bashing away at the keyboard. "Look, it's a mistake to think that the Romantics went into savage attacks on the keyboard," explains Harold C. Schonberg. "They had a wonderful knowledge of how to use the pedals and how to draw a tremendous sound out of the piano without banging. This is characteristic of any 19th century-born pianist I ever heard. They never

banged. Never. But they had all the volume they needed."

Those swift fingers and sure execution allowed him to solve the surpassing technical difficulties of those roaring Romantics like Liszt--not to mention his own works--with ease. But Rosalyn Tureck argues that he was surprisingly effective with the older masters as well. "I'm not saying he was a good Bach player. I fault him very seriously on his Bach. And his arrangement of the Violin Partita was more Rachmaninoff than Bach. But, I think he was the greatest Beethoven player of our time. Artur Schnabel, of course, was a great Beethoven player. But Rachmaninoff was very much more dependable. It was never hard, never percussive. He never pushed. No, he was very much a classical musician with the Beethoven sonatas. And when I say 'classical,' I mean a tradition going back from Anton Rubinstein to Mendelssohn. It was a tradition where fingers were so important. In other words, the perfection of each finger--the equal yet independent quality of each finger. This is an aspect of piano playing that is greatly ignored today. And this is very sad, very tragic for the art of pianism.

Sergei Vassilievich Rachmaninoff was born in Onega, in the Russian district of Novgorod, on April 1, 1873. There was music in his boyhood home. His grandfather, Arkady, had been a piano virtuoso; and his father, Vasili, loved music and also played the piano. After squandering the family fortune, however, Vasili disappeared, leaving the family to fend for itself. They moved into the home of Sergei's grandmother.

After studying for a period at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, the nineteen year-old student entered the Moscow Conservatory. Soon, under the guidance of composition teacher Sergei Taneyev, piano instructor Alexander Siloti, and harmony professor Anton Arensky, Rachmaninoff blossomed; his quick aptitude and pianistic facility astounded everyone--including the great Tchaikovsky himself (who in 1892 attended the premiere of his opera, *Aleko* and pronounced him a great composer). Other early works at this time included the Piano Concerto No. 1 and the Five Pieces for piano, Opus 3.

The Opus 3 set contains his most celebrated--nay, notorious--composition, the Prelude in C-Sharp minor. He introduced it in a Moscow recital on September 26, 1892, and played it, albeit reluctantly, for demanding audiences the rest of his life. Critic James Huneker reported that on at least one occasion Rachmaninoff refused to oblige his listeners' expectations. "[The audience] sorrowed last night," wrote Huneker, "for there are amiable fanatics who follow this pianist from place to place hoping to hear him in this particular Prelude, like the Englishmen who attends every performance of the lady lion tamer hoping to see her swallowed by one of her pets."

By contrast, the premiere of another youthful composition, the Symphony No. 1 (1897), was a public fiasco. "The despair that filled my soul would not leave me," he later explained. "My dreams of a brilliant career lay shattered. My hopes and confidences were destroyed." The symphony was put aside and not performed again until the 1940s.

So deep was Rachmaninoff's depression after the symphony's initial

failure that he was urged to visit a psychoanalyst, Dr. Nikolai Dahl, who practiced hypnotic therapy on him over a period of weeks in early 1900. Feeling restored, Rachmaninoff dashed off the Piano Concerto No. 2 later that year and dedicated it to Dr. Dahl. The music has endured as one of his most popular works. One of its themes was used in the 1940s as the basis for a hit song, "Full Moon and Empty Arms," and other themes were incorporated into movie scores, like Noel Coward's *Brief Encounter*. A truncated concert performance of the concerto was even featured in a Republic film, *I Have Always Loved You* (1945), featuring an off-screen Artur Rubinstein doubling actress Katherine MacLeod at the keyboard. Needless to say, the popularity of the work caused Rachmaninoff to dislike it almost as much as the infamous Prelude.

After Rachmaninoff married his cousin and sweetheart, Natalie Satina, he moved to Dresden, where he composed his two most important works for orchestra, the Symphony No. 2 and the tone poem, *Isle of the Dead* (1908-1909). In 1909 he visited America for the first time, performing the world premiere of his Piano Concerto No. 3 with Walter Damrosch and the New York Symphony. On November 26 of that year he also presented a program of his works with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Rachmaninoff's first impressions of the country that would become his adoptive home were negative. He complained of the perpetual American push for "business, business." He said: "Everyone treats me nicely and kindly, but I am horribly bored with it all, and I feel that my character has been quite spoiled here."

Back in Russia during the war years, he gave concerts for soldiers and refugees. Appalled by the chaos of the Revolution, he decided to leave, making his last public appearance on September 5, 1917. In December he and his wife left Russia with only a small suitcase and a few hundred rubles, never to return. In 1918 he settled in the United States. He refused job offers to conduct several orchestras, concentrating instead on building up his keyboard repertory. Thus, at age forty-five he embarked on a full-time concert career. The remaining years of his life were spent in residences in New York, Lake Lucerne in Switzerland, and, finally, in Beverly Hills. He became an American citizen just a few days before his death on March 28, 1943.

He composed relatively little during his American sojourn. Perhaps this was due to his chronic melancholy over his self-imposed exile from Russia, as well as from the pressures of supporting a family and negotiating demanding concert tours (he had no students). Yet, an association with his beloved Philadelphia Orchestra yielded up the rich legacy of a handful of outstanding new works and memorable recordings. "As a composer his ties were particularly strong with the Philadelphia Orchestra," recalled Eugene Ormandy. "He often said [it] was his favorite." It was this orchestra that presented the world premieres of the Piano Concerto No. 4 (1927), the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini (1934), and the Symphony No. 3 (1936); and the American premieres of The Bells (1920) and the Symphony No. 1 (1941).

"By the time Rachmaninoff came to New York, he was a celebrity," says

Schonberg. "His music was accessible, his pianistic gifts legendary. And here was a link to Tchaikovsky and Anton Rubinstein. He seemed to know everyone. Horowitz told me once that Rachmaninoff had even met the playwright, Anton Chekhov while on a tour in the Crimea at the turn of the century! But Rachmaninoff always tended to be a loner, the perpetual Russian. Most of his friends were Russian and when they were all together they spoke Russian. He gave few interviews and, aside from his concerts, appeared rarely in public."

There were more immediate concerns for the composer/pianist than publicity seeking. "Rachmaninoff had children to raise," remembers Steinway-- "two daughters, Irina and Tatyana. He was a great admirer of my mother, because my mother was of Yankee stock and she could advise him about good schools and the best places to go. I remember him coming to our house talking to my mother about that sort of thing." Otherwise, Rachmaninoff largely restricted himself to the Russian emigre society that had converged in New York after the Revolution. "They would gather sometimes at the home of Alexander Greiner, the concert manager of Steinway, where they played poker. He enjoyed that very much. It was Greiner, I believe, who helped arrange a meeting between Rachmaninoff and the young Vladimir Horowitz."

Harold C. Schonberg recounted this meeting in his recently published biography of Horowitz, *Horowitz: His Life and Music* (Simon and Schuster, 1992). "In my book I said that when Horowitz came to America for his January 1928 debut, he was really more concerned with meeting Rachmaninoff than anything else. Horowitz had had a

fixation on him while he was a student in Kiev. When he was fifteen, he was already working on the Third Piano Concerto. It was not played often at the time; it was considered 'difficult' and it ran rather long. He told me in later years that he always considered Rachmaninoff the greatest pianist.

"Horowitz knew when he came to America he had to approach Rachmaninoff with great care. His teacher, Felix Blumenfeld, wrote a letter to Rachmaninoff about this brilliant new virtuoso who had played the Third with such success. At their first meeting, Horowitz was scared. He was young, just twenty-five, and Rachmaninoff was more than twice his age. Would Rachmaninoff like him, or would he just throw him out? But they hit it off beautifully. Horowitz told me they talked about the Third Concerto and music by Medtner. They talked about friends they knew in Russia.

Rachmaninoff thought Horowitz broke a lot of rules in his piano playing technique, but he pronounced him a great pianist. Later, of course, after Horowitz' sensational New York debut, Rachmaninoff cautioned him about his virtuosity. There's this famous letter which Rachmaninoff wrote him about those infamous octave passages in the third movement of the Tchaikovsky B-flat Piano Concerto. He said something like, 'Your octaves were wonderful, you have won "the octaves race," but I will not congratulate you on them because they were not musical.' He was disturbed by the show-off virtuosity, but it did not impair their friendship after that. Rachmaninoff came to consider that Horowitz' readings of the Third Concerto surpassed his own. They played it together once, you know, in a two-piano version in the Steinway

basement. Rachmaninoff took the orchestral part. Can you imagine what that must have been like?

"Consider how many great pianists were also in New York at the time. In addition to Rachmaninoff, and now Horowitz, there was Josef Hoffman and Josef Lhevinne and Ignaz Friedman. And I'm talking only about romantic piano playing. There were other, equally great artists, like Artur Schnabel and Edwin Fischer. By the 1950s, all of them were gone, except Horowitz. One of the few advantages of having grown old was that I heard them all!

"Anyway, Rachmaninoff became a kind of surrogate father to Horowitz. Wherever Horowitz was playing, he was always anxious to get back to New York and Rachmaninoff. And when Horowitz had his first breakdown in 1936, it was Rachmaninoff who really pulled him out of it and made him practice and who went through the literature with him. They played four hands and he kept patting him on the back and saying, 'You're as good as ever, you should play, you should play.' And, two years later, Horowitz was playing again! When Rachmaninoff died, Horowitz was broken-hearted. I don't think he ever got over it. Rachmaninoff had not only been a friend and confidant, but a pianist who could talk to him on equal terms. Horowitz told me that after his death he felt he had been left without a guide."

It was Horowitz who told Eugene Istomin an anecdote about Rachmaninoff that reveals the sly humor that only his close friends knew. "Rachmaninoff could laugh a lot--sometimes at someone else's expense. Horowitz told me a rather naughty story, naughty in that it shows an all-too human side of us musicians. One day he called Horowitz on the phone--he called him 'Gorovetz,'

because Russians cannot pronounce the letter 'H,' so it was 'Gorovetz.' He said, 'Come over. Come over immediately, I've got something to play for you!' Horowitz said, 'I dropped everything and ran over to Rachmaninoff's house and there he was. But he didn't play for me, he just put on a phonograph record. It was Alfred Cortot playing a Ballade by Chopin. There were so many wrong notes, so many mistakes, that the old boy--Rachmaninoff--started slapping his thighs and roaring with laughter. 'Isn't this something; isn't this something?' he kept saying. There he was, making fun of Cortot's wrong notes! Now, that tells us something about Rachmaninoff's concern for perfection." [See Schonberg's book, *Horowitz: His Life and Music*, 1992, for a variant of this anecdote.]

"I think Rachmaninoff was at times a victim of this perfectionism. During his last years of touring and playing with orchestras like the Cleveland and the New York Philharmonic, they wanted to broadcast his performances. He had his agent, Charles Foley, go into the broadcast booth at Carnegie Hall or Cleveland or wherever and tell the engineer, 'Mr. Rachmaninoff will not go on stage until you turn your microphones off.' Then Foley would hand the engineer the recording Rachmaninoff had made of the Second Piano Concerto with Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra. 'Here, you play this,' Foley would say. 'Play this instead of the performance going on here.' So, the audience in the hall would hear Rachmaninoff playing 'live,' but the audience at home would hear something else. I've heard this story many times. That tells us a lot about his 'shame threshold' about making mistakes. Now,

of course, this sort of thing happens all the time. In the movies. And recently in Barcelona at the Olympic Games when the tenors mouthed the words to a recording they had made before."

It seems like the last twenty years of so of his life was a perpetual concert tour. It became an annual ritual each season for Rachmaninoff to go down to the fabled Steinway basement to choose his pianos. "Rachmaninoff was one of Steinway's special artists," Henry Z. Steinway, "--by which I mean he was serviced with Steinway pianos around the world. At the beginning of the season he would come down here and try out the pianos. After awhile, he would say, 'This one for orchestra, this one for the solo recital.' He always liked a piano with a brighter sound for the orchestra. In those days the railroads were running and we would send these pianos out ahead of his concert dates. We also had a backup in case of some kind of routing change. Bill Hupfer, our chief concert technician, traveled with him as his personal tuner."

Franz Mohr, who recently retired from Steinway as chief concert technician after thirty years service (including professional associations with Vladimir Horowitz and Artur Schnabel), worked for many years under Hupfer. "Bill was proud of his association with Rachmaninoff and they worked together for almost twenty years. The public saw only the gloomy face and quiet side of Rachmaninoff. But Bill would tell me about the other side of the man. That he was very kind and the most generous man you could hope to work for. After each tour Bill would come back with an extra two or three thousand dollars in his pocket. Rachmaninoff always had something extra for him. Bill used to tell me that

Rachmaninoff used to have a little French cognac just before he went on stage. It was the funniest thing--Mrs. Rachmaninoff would be backstage with him before the concert. But then when she went to her seat, Bill would pour him a little cognac. Bill would keep the bottle hidden. It was their secret. Rachmaninoff's wife would not have approved!"

Istomin remembers that Rachmaninoff suffered from stage fright, that he was a worrier. "One of the things that bothered him was that C-Sharp Minor Prelude. He knew people wouldn't let him go until he played it. He would get angry about that. And then finally he would play it and slam the top down of the piano and leave the stage quickly."

"It was his albatross, I guess," confirms pianist Ruth Laredo. It was the first work she chose to play when she recorded his complete two-hand piano works for Columbia in the mid-to-late 1970s. "I didn't know at the time that Rachmaninoff despised it so much. I loved it! I remember my first recording session: Andy [Kasdan] announced over the studio speaker, 'This is Rachmaninoff,' and I started humming those first three chords. Then I started to play."

Piecing together Rachmaninoff's American tours is a special pleasure for Laredo. She possesses a large box of mementos that had been collected by Rachmaninoff's secretary, Nicholas Mondrovsky. At her home on West End Avenue, just a few doors away from Rachmaninoff's former address, she lovingly sifts through the various routing schedules, travel diaries, check receipts, photos, and programs. "Here you see all the things we pianists get to know so well," she says with a rueful grimace.

"Look, here's a route book from the 1941 season. It's all in his handwriting. You see, it's not just big concert dates in New York or Chicago. It's towns like Lafayette, Indiana, Poughkeepsie, White Plains, Northampton, Massachusetts." She points to an entry on one of the pages. "One thing you notice in these books are the indications, 'Rest Period.'" The handwriting slants diagonally downward. "Those were important. In those last years he was tired from the strain. There's this one letter--during a tour he wrote his agent--where he says: 'I'm here in Texas. What am I going to do? Do you expect me to lie here and do nothing? Please get me out of here!'"

Laredo picks up a small, dark-brown wallet. "Here is Rachmaninoff's billfold. And you will see when I open it up why it's so special." She pauses while she extracts a small photograph from the lining. "I have been told this is the last picture taken of him. 'S.R.' is written on it." The dim, unsmiling face appears old and drawn. "I don't think anyone's ever published this picture. It's a very, very personal thing."

As a child growing up in Detroit she heard his music for the first time when Horowitz gave a recital at the Masonic Temple. A hearing of one of his recordings of the Piano Concerto No. 3 confirmed her ambitions to someday perform Rachmaninoff's music. When Columbia announced plans in 1973 to release fresh pressings of Rachmaninoff's own performances, Laredo was approached to record his piano works. "I didn't know enough about it at the time to question it," she says. "I didn't know just what there was or how hard it was or what it would mean. I remember going to my teacher, Rudy Serkin, and asking, 'What do you think of this? Can I do it?' And he said,

'You must do it!'" So I sat down with my producer, Andrew Kasdan, and planned it all out. An awful lot of Rachmaninoff is still not very well known. For good reason. And the reason is, they're too hard! Some of it's very strong and muscular, like the G-minor Prelude [Opus 23, No. 5]; and even the quiet things, like the G-major [Opus 23, No. 5], which is one of my very favorites; it has such intricate textures. Nothing is ever quiet in either hand for very long. You have so much going on at once--like every finger was a little instrument and the hand becomes an orchestra in itself. The chords are huge, and there are times when you just can't possibly reach all the notes. Even in a little thing like a polka he wrote on a theme by his father, which sounds very cute and funny and perky--just try to play it! It's the most demoniacally difficult piece imaginable! I remember Horowitz used to play it and would get a laugh out of the audience because it was so outrageous.

"I must say that preparing to play anything by Rachmaninoff demands more sheer work than any other composer I've ever played. By comparison, I'd say that Tchaikovsky, Brahms, or even Chopin are much more comfortable. Rachmaninoff is always asking you for more. You have to keep at it every single day. You never let go. You can never expect that it's going to be all right next time. The music does not stay in your hand. You can't let it go and then pick it up again and have it there. It isn't there anymore. I don't know why."

After the release of her seven-record set, Laredo was contacted by Peters International publishers about editing some of the music. Since most of his works were written in Russia, and

most of the original scores were there, she traveled to the Soviet Union in 1989.

"What I have learned is that he wrote very few indications of phrasing and dynamics. The scores we have been using have been full of all that sort of thing. He was too aristocratic and quiet a man to put those extra flowery marks on any of his music. So I took the first edition of his works and got rid of all those marking which I felt strongly had not been his. And I wrote in some of my own fingerings to make things clearer. I had never edited music before; so, you see, Rachmaninoff got me involved in things I had never done before!"

In addition to examining manuscripts, she visited several places where Rachmaninoff lived and studied. At the Moscow conservatory she saw the classroom where he studied with classmate, Alexander Scriabin. In St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) she went backstage in the great concert hall where he performed and gazed in astonishment at a photograph of Rachmaninoff sporting a great mustache. She met his great granddaughter, Lana Volkonsky, and has corresponded with her ever since.

As a composer, Rachmaninoff's reputation seems secure. It was not always so. "In his time he was considered to be a throwback to the Tchaikovsky days," says Ruth Laredo. "Those things that we love about his music, the accessibility of so much of it, the big tunes, the unabashed emotions--made it somehow suspicious to critics in his lifetime." Commercial success, moreover, proved to be his worst enemy. "Because of the unparalleled success of some of his pieces," says Schonberg, "like the Second Piano Concerto, the E-

minor Symphony, some of the Preludes, so-called 'serious' critics have had a tendency to underrate him. Certainly this was true during his lifetime. If you look at the Fifth Edition of Grove's Dictionary, 1935, he is absolutely, contemptuously dismissed in just five paragraphs. And there was a confident prediction that the next age would never hear the music of Rachmaninoff again."

Happily, says Rosalyn Tureck, posterity has proven this wrong. "I think he was a superb composer. Maybe coming from somebody like me, who's always identified with Bach, this comes as a surprise. That his music seems not to be a part of the modernism of the era in which he lived is something one can argue about. After all, Schoenberg already was completely settled and his ideas had spread throughout the world. Rachmaninoff may have seemed like something of a throwback to the late 19th century, by contrast. But that deep, brooding, inner-looking quality is very Russian and it has its own validity."

"All you have to do is hear two measures of his music," says Schonberg, "and you immediately say, 'Rachmaninoff!' And to me, this is a mark of an important composer. Take your less than great composers--they're all good and they write very well. But you can't tell one from another, really. Rachmaninoff--you can instantly tell."

Eugene Istomin had a special experience with those qualities when he recorded the Piano Concerto No. 2 with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra in the mid-1950s. In this writer's opinion it remains a landmark among so many splendid readings of the work. "That recording was the high point of my career," Istomin recalls. "Rachmaninoff always felt a special closeness to both Ormandy and the

orchestra. When I found out I had the opportunity to record the Concerto with them, I was so thrilled because I felt that spirit was still there. You say I'm crazy, but I could feel the Master everywhere during those sessions. This is music where you need to sing a song that is sentimental and passionate and heart-stopping. It is so full of all the things that are best in Rachmaninoff--the romance and the sadness and the longing. Always, the longing, longing, longing. It was a bestseller and it sold something like 200,000 copies. But it was made in pre-stereo times in the mid-1950s and it was never re-issued."

Alas, the Istomin recording, as well as the many recordings Rachmaninoff himself made during his lifetime, are seldom heard on today's classical radio stations. Despite the fact that virtually everything that Rachmaninoff conducted or performed is newly available in the stores--his reading of the Symphony No. 3 (recorded in 1939), the Isle of the Dead, and his orchestral version of the Vocalise (all available on the Pearl label); his solo gramophone recordings and all four of the Concerti (BMG); and the Ampico piano roll recordings (London)--many classical radio stations refuse to broadcast them because they are in the monophonic mode. Younger listeners run the risk of never hearing these transcendent performances.

What they can hear, however, are many notable accounts of the orchestral and concerted works in re-releases by Ashkenazy and Previn. Ashkenazy's performances of the complete Preludes on Decca are contemporary classics, while notable readings of the Preludes by Constance Keene and the

Transcriptions by Garrick Ohlsson and Sequeira Costa are indispensable for some collectors. More good news is the re-mastering for compact disc this Spring of the Ruth Laredo Columbia set of complete solo works. Andrew Kasdan, who produced the original set, is supervising the new releases for Sony-Classical. Among outstanding new albums are the Brigitte Engerer/Oleg Maisenberg two-disc set of the four-and-six-hand piano music (Harmonia Mundi) and several versions of the Vespers, Opus 37, by the Corydon Singers (Hyperion).

The 1993 season promises many Rachmaninoff concerts and tours. At this writing, Rachmaninoff's grandson, Alexandre, is organizing a Memorial Concert at Carnegie Hall on October 18. The program will include The Bells, excerpts from Vespers, and the Piano Concerto No. 3 (artists to be announced). The Philadelphia Orchestra will continue its Rachmaninoff tradition with a new recording by Charles Dutoit of the Symphony No. 2 and the Isle of the Dead. Ruth Laredo and the Warsaw Philharmonic will perform the Rachmaninoff First and Third Concertos on a tour that begins with in Warsaw, October 15-19, and returns to the United States from October 25 to November 21, concluding with a Carnegie Hall concert.

Despite the popularity of his music and the impact of his personality, there was always something mournfully remote about the man, something that, like the "Dies Irae" motif in his music,

was never far away. "The last time I saw Rachmaninoff on stage was in 1942," says Eugene Istomin. "I was sixteen years old and I sat on the stage of the Academy of Music with my teacher, Rudolph Serkin. After the performance, Rachmaninoff came out of the stage door with a big hat over his face. He gave us all that 'Don't-talk-to-me-anybody' look and disappeared into the night."

Within a year he was dead.

The story is typical. To the end it was not just that lacerating grief over his lost homeland that made him feel so alone and so gloomy. Certainly it was not the lack of a family, of acclaim, and of monetary success in his lifetime--he had a full measure of all three. Rather, Harold C. Schonberg says that Rachmaninoff once told Horowitz that "all his life he had tried to succeed in three things--composition, piano playing, and conducting--and had succeeded in none." Rachmaninoff himself once admitted, "I am constantly troubled by the misgiving that, in venturing into too many fields, I may have failed to make the best of my life. In the old Russian phrase, I have 'hunted three hares.' Can I be sure that I have killed one of them?"

Commentator Charles Burr's reply is, I think, a fitting epitaph to the Russian master: "Rest easy, great composer, magnificent pianist, fine conductor, and mighty hunter of hares. You got all three."

John C. Tibbetts