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SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Sergei Vassilievich Rachmaninoff was born on his father's estate in Oneg in the district of Novgorod, Russia in 1873. He studied in St. Petersburg and at the Moscow Conservatory under Nicolai Zverev and Anton Arensky. His early compositions were influenced by his warm admiration for Tchaikovsky, and the fame of the *Prelude in C minor* brought him an invitation to conduct in London in 1898. He lived in Dresden for several years, gave concerts in the United States in 1909-1910, and then returned to Moscow, where he conducted the Philharmonic concerts from 1911-1913. He left Russia in 1917, and later settled in the United States. He composed three operas, three symphonies, a tone poem *The Isle of the Dead* (1907), and other works for orchestra, four concertos and a *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini* (the same as that used by Brahms for his Variations) for piano and orchestra, piano music (including an important set of preludes and études-tableaux), choral works, chamber music, and songs.

At one time it was fashionable to disparage Rachmaninoff as a romantic born out of his period, to condemn many of his large-scale works because of their "structural weaknesses," and to claim that his inspiration dwindled as he grew older. But now that his music has come more fully into focus, it is easy to refute these accusations. His greatest choral work – the second symphony – is probably also his best. It is a work of great emotional power and melodic intensity, and it is structurally sound – provided that performers do not attempt to "improve" it by cutting it. His romanticism was an asset rather than a liability, and in any case was irrelevant to works like the third piano concerto and the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* – finely integrated scores, in which style and content are perfectly suited to each other. As for the loss of inspiration, one need only point out that one of his most progressive and compelling

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works, the *Symphonic Dances* for orchestra, dates from the very end of his career. Sergei Rachmaninoff died in Beverly Hills, California, in 1943.

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