



AUDIOPHILE EDITION

RACHMANINOV

Symphonic Dances

The Isle of the Dead

Caprice bohémien • Scherzo

St. Louis Symphony Orchestra • Leonard Slatkin



Sergey Rachmaninov (1873–1943)
Symphonic Dances, Op. 45 • Caprice bohémien, Op. 12
Scherzo in D minor • The Isle of the Dead, Op. 29

Tchaikovsky studied law and actually held a minor position in the Ministry of Justice before he embraced music as a full-time career; Borodin was a physician and scientist who composed music in the time allowed by his professional duties; Rimsky-Korsakov, a naval officer in his youth, learned his musical craft while teaching conservatory students, managing, as he modestly recorded, to stay a day or two ahead of them. Unlike those revered musical compatriots, Sergey Vasilyevich Rachmaninov grew up in a musical family and never had any sort of career in mind for himself but a musical one. Alexander Siloti, the pianist, conductor, pedagogue and general activist for Russian music, was a cousin and took an interest in the young Rachmaninov's training. In his teens Rachmaninov had Siloti as his piano teacher and worked with both Sergey Taneyev and Anton Arensky in composition. Taneyev, a pupil of Tchaikovsky, brought the young composer to that master's attention. Six months before his own death Tchaikovsky attended the Moscow premiere of Rachmaninov's opera *Aleko* and saluted him as an equal; Rachmaninov had just turned 20, but had already performed the first version of his *First Piano Concerto* and had composed numerous other works.

Through much of his life and for a decade or more after his death, Rachmaninov was regarded as primarily a pianist – one who happened to compose a few very effective pieces and who sometimes conducted (just as Gustav Mahler was long regarded as a conductor who dabbled in composition). In his thirties he was more widely recognised as a conductor than as a pianist: he presided over some brilliant seasons at the Bolshoi Opera in Moscow, and in the US twice declined the Boston Symphony Orchestra's invitation to become its music director. He withdrew from his performing commitments as much as possible during the early years of the 20th century in order to devote himself to composing, but his reemphasised performing activity in the years following the First World War and the Russian Revolution, necessitated by his financial losses at that time, brought about an extended hiatus in his creative work. It was in the mid-1920s that he was again able to give his composing first place among his activities, and his final decade saw the creation of such masterworks as the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, the *Third Symphony*, and the *Symphonic Dances*.

It is definitely as a composer that Rachmaninov is remembered now. Orchestras everywhere not only perform his concertos and symphonies with great frequency, but season after season present programmes made up entirely of his music, in many cases augmenting the familiar favourites with lesser-known or 'rediscovered' works which help to fill in the fascinating picture of a major creative artist. Leonard Slatkin, who has given witness to his own belief in the importance of Rachmaninov's music by performing it with numerous American and European orchestras, has presented several such programmes in St. Louis and has there presented the American premieres of two early works. Having already recorded the four concertos and the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* with pianist Abbey Simon as well as the three symphonies, Leonard Slatkin and the St. Louis Symphony finished by recording the entire works for orchestra (including that for chorus and orchestra).

Rachmaninov was just four days shy of reaching his 70th birthday when he died in Beverly Hills on 28 March 1943. He had enjoyed recognition in the international musical community for more than 50 years. His orchestral works range from 1887, when Rachmaninov was not yet 14, to 1940, when he produced his valedictory work, the *Symphonic Dances*. These alone would be sufficient to illustrate both the validity and the consistency of his frequently quoted self-characterisation:

‘A composer’s music should express the country of his birth, his love affairs, his religion... it should be the sum total of the composer’s experiences. I compose music because I must give expression to my feelings, just as I talk because I must give utterance to my thoughts ... I am a Russian composer, and the land of my birth has inevitably influenced my temperament and outlook.’

Symphonic Dances, Op. 45

While Rachmaninov composed several works especially for presentation in the United States, the only one he composed fully in this country was his last, the *Symphonic Dances*, which followed his *Third Symphony* in 1940, after a hiatus of four years in his creative activity. He prepared a version for two pianos before completing the orchestral one; the latter was introduced on 4 January 1941, by Eugene Ormandy and The Philadelphia Orchestra, to whom the score is dedicated. Rachmaninov himself was a little surprised by the quality of his valedictory effort, which many consider the finest of all his works for orchestra: ‘I don’t know how it happened,’ he remarked, ‘it must have been my last spark.’ He died two years after the premiere, without attempting any further composition.

This ‘last spark’ constitutes a true valediction, in the sense of representing a summing-up as well as simply a conclusion or farewell. The work is first of all a summing-up of Rachmaninov’s activity as a symphonist, for only his choice of nomenclature excludes it from the cycle nominally concluded by the three-movement *Third Symphony* of 1936. That it also represents a conscious review of his half-century of creative activity is indicated by the citation of themes or fragments from certain earlier works (in a far more subtle, less conspicuous way than the blatant manner in which Strauss quoted himself, at a much earlier stage in his career, in *Ein Heldenleben*). The *First Symphony*, which had apparently been abandoned after its calamitous premiere in 1897 and was not to surface again until two years after Rachmaninov’s death, is cited in the coda to the first of the three Dances (a piece which actually has a great deal in common with the first movement of the *Symphony No. 1*, rhythmically even more than thematically), and an *Alleluia* from the *Op. 37 Vespers* of 1915 makes a similar appearance in the coda of the finale. There is also, in the final movement, and far more conspicuously presented, the *Dies irae*, which had intrigued Rachmaninov throughout his creative life; many composers have made use of this motif in one way or another, but Rachmaninov would appear to have been virtually obsessed with it, so often – and so aptly – did he make use of it in works in various forms.

If the above observations suggest some sort of programmatic content, autobiographical or otherwise, for the *Symphonic Dances*, such an assumption may be confirmed in noting that Rachmaninov originally thought of giving each section of this triptych a descriptive title – *Midday*, *Twilight* and *Midnight*, respectively – symbolising three stages of life. (His original title for the work, by the way, was *Fantastic Dances*, and each panel is indeed a sort of fantasy.) He might well have come up with a detailed programme for the work if Michel Fokine had not died in 1942. Rachmaninov was quite happy with Fokine’s choreographic treatment of his *Paganini Rhapsody*, for which he volunteered his own scenario, and he performed the *Symphonic Dances* for him on the piano before he completed the orchestration, but Fokine’s death precluded any discussion of similar treatment for this work, and Rachmaninov stuck with the decision he had made before the premiere, to let the tempo markings suffice as movement headings; that decision seems quite in keeping with the essentially symphonic nature of the work.

In the first movement, marked *Non allegro*, there are, as in the *Fourth Concerto*, syncopated sections which may or may not represent conscious allusions to American jazz; that notion is reinforced in this case by the conspicuous

presence of an alto saxophone. Rachmaninov had never written for that instrument before, and before undertaking to fit it into his orchestral fabric he sought the advice of the celebrated Broadway orchestrator Robert Russell Bennett. The movement, even more striking for its rhythmic strength than for its themes, is in sonata form.

Andante con moto (Tempo di valse) is the heading of the second movement, which has a more nocturnal character than the 'Twilight' heading would imply. It comes from a world somewhere between the *Valse triste* of Sibelius and the gently nostalgic concert waltzes of Glazunov; perhaps its most readily identifiable ancestor would be the *Valse mélancolique* in Tchaikovsky's *Suite No. 3* (a work, incidentally, whose finale also quotes the *Dies irae*), but it displays a sense of fantasy entirely Rachmaninov's own, in which the evocation of the subtly deepening nocturnal mood is extraordinarily successful.

The final movement, after a brief introductory *Lento assai*, is a dramatic *Allegro vivace* whose dark events are more than intimidated by the prominence of the *Dies irae*, on which much of the movement is based, rather in the nature of a set of quasi-variations. The lush passage for the strings, with occasional interjections by the flute or harp, summons up the ecstatic expressiveness of the great slow movements of the *Second Concerto* and the *Second Symphony*, but the end has the emphatic feeling or a 'last word' – final, conclusive, irrevocable.

Caprice bohémien, Op. 12

Rachmaninov began this score shortly after the premiere of *The Rock*, no doubt encouraged by that work's success, and completed it in August 1894; the premiere took place in Moscow on 22 November of the following year, by which time the *First Symphony* had been completed. The *First Symphony*, never played again in the composer's lifetime after its disastrous premiere in 1897, has been welcomed into the general repertory now, but the *Caprice bohémien* remains one of Rachmaninov's least-known compositions.

The 'bohémien' of the title does not identify this work as a fantasy on themes from Bohemia or as music in any way related to Czech lore, but is to be taken in its other meaning, as Rachmaninov made clear in his alternative title, 'Capriccio for large Orchestra, Based on Gypsy Themes'. The work, which followed by less than two years the opera (*Aleko*) based on Pushkin's poem *The Gypsies*, is thought to have been a gesture toward the enchanting wife of Piotr Lodyzhensky, the friend to whom Rachmaninov actually dedicated the score. Anna Lodyzhenska was of Gypsy parentage, and the 21-year-old Rachmaninov was said to have been quite smitten with her at the time he wrote this music. (His next major work, the *First Symphony*, was dedicated to Anna herself, but is so indicated with discreet initials only.)

Like Rimsky-Korsakov's famous *Capriccio espagnol*, the *Caprice bohémien* is laid out in five interconnected sections; in this work, however, the respective sections are less clearly demarked than in Rimsky-Korsakov's, flowing seamlessly from one to the next, and a single leading theme is given prominence throughout the sequence. While there are miniature variations in one portion of the work (as in Rimsky-Korsakov's *Capriccio*), the dominant theme is not subjected to conventional variation treatment, but rather to a subtle form of metamorphosis in which both its shape and its character remain recognisable as the moods and colours are shifted. Instead of marked contrasts from one section to the next, the outline here is one of cumulative development, from the darkly dramatic opening, through interludes rapturous and reflective, to an effectively animated conclusion which evokes recollections of one of the *Hungarian Rhapsodies* of Liszt.

Scherzo in D minor

This all but unknown piece has a good claim to being the earliest of Rachmaninov's completed works; none other, in any event, bears an earlier date (though several of the early pieces are not dated). The *Scherzo* was begun on 5 February 1887, and completed on 21 February, five weeks before the composer's 14th birthday. It is possible that it was given a reading by a student ensemble at the Moscow Conservatory, but there is no record of such a performance, or of any other, public or private, prior to the public premiere in Moscow, which did not take place until 2 November 1945 (Nikolai Anosov conducting).

According to Rachmaninov's American biographer Francis Crociata, the *Scherzo* 'was most likely composed secretly'. Mr Crociata has kindly supplied the following background on the work:

'Rachmaninov during this time lived in the residence of his principal piano teacher Nicholas Zveryev. Zveryev frowned on any sort of activity which would preoccupy the piano prodigies in his care, including the serious pursuit of musical composition. Rachmaninov's contemporary, the pianist and pedagogue Leon Conus (later a prominent Cincinnati musician), recalled Rachmaninov composing during the following summer at Zveryev's Balkan estate, having to secret himself under a tablecloth. He then conspiratorially handed Conus his opus: a piano prelude which he proposed to dedicate to him. That prelude became part of a four-piece set which, along with a piece in binary form, three nocturnes and a vocal work called *Esmeralda*, are all the compositions dating from his graduation year at the Conservatory which have survived.

'In fact, Rachmaninov left Zveryev's house abruptly at age 16, reportedly over a disagreement regarding the time Rachmaninov devoted to a study of composition, although other more sensational reasons have been suggested for the break.'

Another authoritative commentator on Russian music, the English writer John Warrack (biographer of Tchaikovsky and of Weber), describes the *Scherzo* as 'a remarkable technical feat' for a boy in his 14th year, but adds that, 'not surprisingly, it is hardly more than a gifted exercise, taking the form of a neat imitation of Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream Scherzo*, even to the point of a racing flute and lightly scored woodwind.' Interestingly enough, a brilliant piano transcription of the Mendelssohn *Scherzo*, introduced early in 1933, was to become one of the most popular solo pieces of Rachmaninov's maturity.

The Isle of the Dead, Op. 29

As already noted, Rachmaninov, in common with many other composers who had successful careers as performers, had to steal time from his performing commitments in order to pursue his creative activity through much of his life. In his early thirties he enjoyed two conspicuously successful seasons as conductor at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, following which, in 1906, he decided to give himself more time for a long period. He had enjoyed a visit to Dresden once, and it was there he took his wife and infant daughter; they remained there for about three years, returning to Russia only for the summers, and it was during the early part of this period that Rachmaninov composed two of his most successful works for orchestra – the *Second Symphony* and the tone poem *The Isle of the Dead*. The latter work was composed in 1907 and first performed on 1 May 1909, in Moscow, Rachmaninov conducting.

The painting that inspired this symbolic poem was seen by Rachmaninov on a visit to Leipzig, the proximity of which city had been one of his reasons for settling in Dresden. The painter Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901), was a Swiss whose Romantic, melancholy style and sumptuously dark colouration struck an especially sympathetic chord in Rachmaninov – who was, however, neither the only composer nor the first to respond to Böcklin’s paintings with music. Max Reger composed a ‘Böcklin Suite’ of four shorter tone poems, one of which reflects the same painting that caught Rachmaninov’s fancy. *Die Toteninsel* (*The Isle of the Dead*) shows an island which is almost entirely cliff, rising awesomely from the water into a sunless sky; a portal has been carved through which the boat bearing a coffin may enter, and in the centre, beyond the entrance, cypresses rise taller than the rocky sepulchre. The small boat making its way toward that grim portal bears a white coffin across its bow, draped with wreaths; a solitary figure, shrouded in white, stands over it, and a single oarsman rows in the stern.

Like the painting itself, the music inspired by it seeks to evoke a mood more than to tell a story, though details of the visual image are reflected in the music. The opening suggests the water quietly lapping against the shoreless cliffside. At length the horn breathes a lamentation; the undulating figure of the opening becomes more animated and the lamentation is taken up more poignantly by the oboe. The opening figure asserts itself still more energetically, and the lamentation takes the form of a brass chorale, its shape recognised more clearly now as what was only hinted earlier: it is a variant of the *Dies irae*, the ancient chant for the dead. (This motif appears in many of Rachmaninov’s works, from the earliest to the latest, but in none with such obvious aptness as in this one.)

The middle section corresponds to one of Rachmaninov’s great slow movements, reaching an emotional peak in a soaring, lyrical transformation of the lament theme in the strings. This rapturous effect is dispelled by a menacing orchestral irruption which leads to the concluding section, in which the insistent tread of the *Dies irae* prevails in one form or another as other materials are heard again. Finally the melodic fragments dissolve, even the murmuring of the water stilled, the sky changes from sunless to dark; lamentation has ended, memory has vanished, and only stillness remains.

Richard Freed

Booklet notes reprinted from the original LP release

St. Louis Symphony Orchestra

Founded in 1880, the St. Louis Symphony is the second-oldest orchestra in the United States and is widely considered one of the world's finest. In September 2005, internationally acclaimed conductor David Robertson became the twelfth music director and second American-born conductor in the orchestra's history. The St. Louis Symphony is one of only a handful of major American orchestras invited to perform regularly at the prestigious Carnegie Hall. Recordings by the symphony have been honoured with six GRAMMY Awards and 56 GRAMMY nominations over the years. The orchestra has embraced technological advances in music distribution by offering recordings online. The St. Louis Symphony download initiative includes live recordings of John Adams' *Harmonielehre*, Szymanowski's *Violin Concerto No. 1*, with Christian Tetzlaff, and Scriabin's *The Poem of Ecstasy* available exclusively on iTunes and Amazon.com. In 2009, the symphony's Nonesuch recording of John Adams' *Doctor Atomic* and *Guide to Strange Places* reached No. 2 on the *Billboard* rankings for classical music, and was named 'Best CD of the Decade' by the *The Times* of London. In September 2012, the St. Louis Symphony embarked on its first European tour with music director David Robertson. The symphony visited international festivals in Berlin and Lucerne, with stops in Paris and London as well, performing works by Beethoven, Brahms, Sibelius, Schoenberg, Gershwin and Elliott Carter. Christian Tetzlaff joined the symphony as featured soloist. In June 2008, the St. Louis Symphony launched *Building Our Business*, which takes a proactive, two-pronged approach: build audiences and re-invigorate the St. Louis brand making the symphony and Powell Hall *the place to be*; and build the donor base for enhanced institutional commitment and donations. This is all part of a larger strategic plan adopted in May 2009 that includes new core ideology and a ten-year strategic vision focusing on artistic and institutional excellence, doubling the existing audience, and revenue growth across all key operating areas.

Leonard Slatkin

Internationally acclaimed conductor Leonard Slatkin is Music Director Laureate of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO), Directeur Musical Honoraire of the Orchestre National de Lyon (ONL), and Conductor Laureate of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. He maintains a rigorous schedule of guest conducting throughout the world and is active as a composer, author, and educator. Slatkin has received six GRAMMY Awards and 35 nominations.

One of his recent recordings for Naxos is the world premiere of Alexander Kastalsky's *Requiem for Fallen Brothers* commemorating the 100th anniversary of the armistice ending the First World War. Other recent Naxos releases include works by Saint-Saëns, Ravel, and Berlioz (with the ONL) and music by Copland, Rachmaninov, Borzova, McTee, and John Williams (with the DSO). In addition, he has recorded the complete Brahms, Beethoven, and Tchaikovsky symphonies with the DSO (available online as digital downloads).

A recipient of the prestigious National Medal of Arts, Slatkin also holds the rank of Chevalier in the French Legion of Honour. He has received the Prix Charbonnier from the Federation of Alliances Françaises, Austria's Decoration of Honour in Silver, the League of American Orchestras' Gold Baton Award, and the 2013 ASCAP Deems Taylor Special Recognition Award for his debut book, *Conducting Business*. A second volume, *Leading Tones: Reflections on Music, Musicians, and the Music Industry*, was published by Amadeus Press in 2017. His most recent book, *Classical Crossroads: The Path Forward for Music in the 21st Century* (2021), is available through Rowman & Littlefield.

Slatkin has conducted virtually all the leading orchestras in the world. As Music Director, he has held posts in New Orleans; St. Louis; Washington, DC; London (with the BBC Symphony Orchestra); Detroit; and Lyon, France. He has also served as Principal Guest Conductor in Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Cleveland.

www.leonardslatkin.com



First released in 1982 as 4-VCL 9013X

Rachmaninov's final work – and the only one composed fully in the United States – was the *Symphonic Dances*. It embraces jazz elements and ecstatic expressiveness and is both a valediction and a summation of his creativity. *The Isle of the Dead* is a lamentation utilising a variant of the *Dies irae* – it is a stirring, transformative work that begins and ends in stillness. The early *Caprice bohémien* and *Scherzo in D minor* complete this programme of Leonard Slatkin's admired Rachmaninov recordings on Vox, heard here newly remastered from the original tapes.

The Elite Recordings for Vox by legendary producers Marc Aubort and Joanna Nickrenz are considered by audiophiles to be amongst the finest sounding examples of orchestral recordings

Sergey
RACHMANINOV
(1873–1943)

Symphonic Dances, Op. 45 (1940) 33:59

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|----------|--|-------|
| 1 | I. Non allegro | 11:35 |
| 2 | II. Andante con moto (Tempo di valse) | 9:13 |
| 3 | III. Lento assai – Allegro vivace – Lento assai – Come prima
– Allegro vivace | 13:10 |

4 Capriccio on Gypsy Themes 'Caprice bohémien', Op. 12 17:44
(1892–94)

5 Scherzo in D minor (1888) 4:49

6 The Isle of the Dead, Op. 29 (1909) 20:27

St. Louis Symphony Orchestra
Leonard Slatkin

New 192 kHz / 24-bit high definition transfers of the original Elite Recordings analogue master tapes

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Booklet notes: Richard Freed

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