CHANDOS

RACHMANINOFF

SYMPHONY NO. 1
SYMPHONIC DANCES

SINFONIA OF LONDON

JOHN WILSON

Sputnik / Performing Arts Images / ArenaPAL

Serge Rachmaninoff, 1 April 1892

Serge Rachmaninoff (1873 – 1943)

Symphony No. 1, Op. 13 (1895) **44:16**

in D minor • in d-Moll • en ré mineur

To A.L. [Anna Alexandrovna Lodyzhenskaya]

Edited by Ed Liebrecht

'Vengeance is mine, I will repay'
Romans 12: 19
Quoted in *Anna Karenina* (1878)
by Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy (1828 – 1910)

1	I	Grave – Allegro ma non troppo – Più vivo – Moderato – Meno mosso – Moderato – Allegro vivace – Maestoso – Allegro vivace – L'istesso tempo – Moderato – Meno mosso – Moderato – Allegro molto – Più vivo – Allegro vivace	13:19
2	II	Allegro animato – Meno mosso – Tempo I	8:22
3	III	Larghetto – Più mosso – Largo un poco – Con moto – Tempo I	9:51
4	IV	Allegro con fuoco – Marciale (sempre marcato) – Moto primo – Con moto – Con anima – Più vivo – Allegro mosso – Più vivo – Con moto – Meno mosso. Comodo – Allegro con fuoco – Con moto – Con moto – Presto – Largo – Grave – Con moto	12:28

Symphonic Dances, Op. 45 (1940) **33:09**
Dedicated to Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra
Edited by John Wilson

5 I [Midday.] Non allegro – Lento – A tempo più mosso – Tempo I 10:49

6 II [Twilight.] Andante con moto (Tempo di valse) – L'istesso tempo – A tempo meno mosso – Tempo precedente – A tempo, poco meno mosso – Tempo I – Vivo – A tempo, poco meno mosso – Tempo precedente (senza ritenuto) 8:49

7 III [Midnight.] Lento assai – Allegro vivace – Lento assai, come prima – L'istesso tempo – L'istesso tempo, ma agitato – Allegro vivace – Poco meno mosso – 'Alliluya' – A tempo 13:21

TT 77:32

Sinfonia of London
Charlie Lovell-Jones leader
John Wilson

Rachmaninoff:
Symphony No. 1 / Symphonic Dances

Symphony No. 1 in D minor, Op. 13
The First Symphony of Serge Rachmaninoff (1873 – 1943) dates from 1895, when the twenty-two-year-old composer was looking to build on the unexpected success of his graduation-piece opera, *Aleko*. The first performance was arranged by the famous patron of the arts Mitrofan Belyayev for his Russian Symphony Concerts in St Petersburg, and it took place on 15 March 1897 at the Hall of Nobility, later to become the Philharmonic Hall. It proved a disaster, mainly because the fine but highly conservative composer Alexander Glazunov, as all reports agree, conducted with an almost total lack of interest and understanding. (The story that he was drunk, though certainly plausible, was not circulated until much later and may be a myth.) César Cui's memorably vitriolic review, comparing the symphony to the Seven Plagues of Egypt, is sometimes blamed for the composer's ensuing three-year creative block (to be overcome, after consultations with a hypnotherapist, in the Second Piano Concerto). But this depression almost certainly had more to do with Rachmaninoff's over-developed self-critical faculties. By comparison with his best works the First Symphony may indeed have left Rachmaninoff biting off slightly more than he could chew; but its failings were greatly magnified in the composer's mind.

The portentous opening sets the emotional tone, as if to embody the Biblical motto in the score, 'Vengeance is mine. I will repay' (also appended to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*). These bars lay out the main musical material for the entire work, as both the chromatic snarl and the defiant response in the strings are destined to reappear in manifold guises. Together they bear a striking resemblance to the motif of 'Wotan's Frustration', from Act II of *Die Walküre*. But the musical journeys on which they are taken are more reminiscent of Tchaikovsky, who had died two years earlier and whose mantle was awaiting shoulders worthy of it. The extent of the debt which Rachmaninoff owed to Tchaikovsky was already evident from the single surviving movement of a symphony demanded of him by his teacher Antoni Arensky, in 1891, dubbed 'Youthful Symphony' at its first publication, in 1947.

In true Tchaikovskian fashion, the first movement unfolds as the drama of an

anguished soul, played out within the bounds of academically correct sonata form. There is a gypsy-inflected second subject, heard on the oboe after a winding transition in the violins, and the central section kicks off with a short-lived but wirily determined fugue (a discipline which Rachmaninoff loathed when compelled to study it under the formidable contrapuntist Sergey Taneyev).

Next comes an unassuming scherzo, all half-lights and wistful charm, at least until the snarling motif returns and the strings remove their mutes. Cyclic reminiscences of this kind were more the norm than the exception at this stage in symphonic history, and Rachmaninoff's First is replete with them. The main idea of the slow movement, played in turn by clarinet, oboe, and flute, is a reworking of the gypsy-inflected theme from the first movement. Once again, the snarling motif makes its presence felt, not only at the outset but also in a dark-hued central episode.

At the head of the finale stands a march-like transformation of the main idea of the first movement, once familiar in the UK as the signature tune for the current affairs programme *Panorama*. Disappointingly for some, perhaps, little more is heard of this rousing call to arms as the movement proceeds. Instead of an apotheosis based on its return or transformation, Rachmaninoff comes up with the first of his 'big tunes', which seems destined to purge the prevailing tone of storm and stress. In this instance, though, there is to be no straightforward triumph, and the forces of light and dark are held in precarious balance until almost the last moment.

Rachmaninoff left the manuscript of the score in Russia when he emigrated, in 1917, and it disappeared after the death, in 1925, of the housekeeper of his sister-in-law. (There have been unconfirmed reports that it has survived in private hands.) He never made moves to have the symphony performed again, but he did incorporate the first movement's main idea into his late masterpiece the *Symphonic Dances*, of 1940, supplying it with an achingly beautiful harmonisation which suggests that he retained a strong affection for the ill-fated work. Two years after his death, the symphony was reconstructed from orchestral parts discovered in the Leningrad Conservatoire. Its second performance was given at the Moscow Conservatoire, on 17 October 1945, and that proved to be the beginning of a triumphant posthumous rehabilitation. In the 1960s both the composer Robert Simpson and the musicologist David Brown dubbed it

Rachmaninoff's finest symphony, and if that estimation now seems slightly exaggerated, at the time it could have been taken as deserved compensation for a painful history of neglect.

Symphonic Dances, Op. 45

As he moved into his sixties, Rachmaninoff had nothing to prove. As a pianist, he had long since become a household name. As a conductor, he had largely rested on his laurels since leaving Russia, in December 1917 (his family estate having been confiscated by the Bolsheviks earlier in the year); although he continued to conduct occasionally, he was seemingly content to leave no lasting mark on that profession. As a composer, by contrast, he had plenty left to say, as his Symphony No. 3, the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini and, finally, the *Symphonic Dances*, all composed during his last decade, would make abundantly clear.

On 10 August 1940 Rachmaninoff completed the *Symphonic Dances* in their version for two pianos, which he would play, though never record, with Vladimir Horowitz. Their adaptation for orchestra was ready on 29 October and was dedicated to Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, who had premièred all the composer's recent large-scale works. They gave the first performance, on 3 January 1941, to respectful rather than rapturous acclaim. Ormandy confessed that he did not rate the *Dances* a pinnacle among the composer's achievements; Rachmaninoff, for his part, was on this occasion not impressed with Ormandy's conducting.

Rachmaninoff had initially wavered over the title. The pieces were originally dubbed merely *Dances*, and later *Fantastic Dances*. At one stage he had considered the possibility that his friend Michael Fokine might choreograph them, as he had done the 'Paganini' Rhapsody, but Fokine's death, in 1942, put paid to that idea. Only after embarking on the orchestration did the *Symphonic Dances* gain their definitive title.

In fact, the movements are in many ways more symphonic than they are dances, arguably as much as or more so than the *Symphony in Three Movements* which Stravinsky composed between 1942 and 1945. (The coincidence of these and Hindemith's *Symphonic Metamorphosis of Themes by Carl Maria von Weber*, composed in the US in 1943, suggests that the idea of hybridity was in the air at the time.) Nor do Rachmaninoff's originally conceived movement titles, 'Midday', 'Twilight', and 'Midnight', offer many clues to the character of the music.

It has been said, with some justification, that Rachmaninoff sought to summarise his entire composing career in this final work. But more than that, he showed that he did not depend on soloistic fireworks or 'big tunes' in order to do so. There is, in fact, just one such tune in the *Dances*, rather modestly decked out, which comes a few minutes into the first movement. This theme possesses several remarkable features, apart from its characteristically sinuous, seemingly infinitely self-renewing beauty. For one thing, it does not reappear, either later in the first movement reprise or as any kind of cyclic reminiscence or apotheosis in the finale. For another, it is allocated to the saxophone, an instrument to which Rachmaninoff had not previously turned, though he could scarcely have been unaware of its use by others such as Debussy, Glazunov, and Ravel. Concerned that he might somehow miss the mark, he turned to the prolific popular composer-arranger Robert Russell Bennett for advice. Before settling on the alto saxophone, he had even considered having the melody sung as a vocalise by the famous African-American contralto Marian Anderson.

The saxophone melody is a reflective, song-like episode in a movement dominated by determined, march-like momentum. The curious designation *Non allegro* is in fact remarkably precise. Without it, any pianist or conductor would likely imagine a swifter tempo than the one which Rachmaninoff himself took in his fragmentary precis of the score in a private solo-piano recording at Ormandy's house. On the other hand, this is no straightforward *Allegretto* or *Moderato*. It is the quality of being bloody-mindedly not an *Allegro* that is of the essence.

The saxophone is far from the only example of resourceful orchestration in the *Dances*. From the outset, Rachmaninoff supports his *Non allegro* theme with harp, later on with piano (did he perhaps learn from Prokofiev's habitual inclusion of the instrument in his orchestration?) and glockenspiel. Tubular bells and xylophone will figure strikingly in the later movements.

What happens instead of the return of the saxophone theme is a moment of quintessential Rachmaninoffian magic. The *Non allegro* theme gracefully subsides, and piano and harp lead the texture heavenwards, at which point a previously unheard quasi-chorale on strings unfolds, the theme being carried by first violins high on the G string, doubling cellos. This is the theme of the finale of the First Symphony, of which – the composer having shelved it after its disastrous première – no one in the audience for the *Symphonic Dances* could have known,

as it was considered irretrievably lost. The most painful memory of Rachmaninoff's career was here, at least partly, assuaged.

The second movement is the closest to a literal evocation of the dance. It is prefaced by a vehement introduction in which muted brass thrice alternate with intimations of the waltz to come, before a violin solo alludes to the descending triads of the first movement introduction. At length, the cor anglais and oboe launch the waltz theme itself. As this theme unwinds, it acquires swirling triplet figurations that were themselves seeded in the movement's opening bars and which sure enough now lead to a return of the muted brass snarls of the introduction. A second waltz unfurls, which itself spawns new ideas, only to be cut off in their prime by the brass. If 'Twilight' was on Rachmaninoff's mind at some point in the composition of this movement, it was evidently the opposite of a scenario of comfort or serenity. An artful reprise combines previously heard themes before scurrying away in much the same way, and in the same key, as the most famous of the piano Preludes, the one in G minor, Op. 23 No. 5.

Another of Rachmaninoff's sophisticated introductions ushers in the final movement, foreshadowing the energetic main ideas while confronting them with halting sighs and with tubular bells that seem to have migrated from the choral symphony *The Bells*, one of the last works he completed before his self-exile. At length, the 'dance' is underway. If anything, this is a symphonic take on a tarantella, another favourite genre of the composer's, at least since the Second Piano Suite, Op. 8.

It is not long before piccolo, flute, and xylophone intone a version of the Dies irae, the chant that haunts so many of Rachmaninoff's works: confirmation that we are in the middle of a full-on *danse macabre*. The shadowy slower central section turns its back on the tarantella and develops into a romantic scena, marked *lamentoso* at its height: seemingly an episode of contrition, pleading for absolution.

A return of the *Allegro vivace* recasts the tarantella in a virtuoso compositional blend of transition, development, and transfiguration. The Dies irae hangs on until it is blasted out gleefully by the four horns in unison. But the goal lies in the transformation of both chant and dance into the Resurrection doxology from the orthodox service, 'Blessed art thou, Lord'. Few, if any, would recognise the allusion, unless they recalled the ninth movement of Rachmaninoff's *All-Night Vigil*, of 1915, and even then, the transformation is hidden within the ongoing momentum of the

ever-mutating tarantella. In the orchestral score (though curiously not in the two-piano version) Rachmaninoff took the trouble to mark 'Alliluya' at the crucial moment (it comes when the orchestral *tutti* abates, alternating with xylophone, violins, trumpets, clarinets, and bassoons). The key signature for the final pages of this movement is D minor. Yet the harmony is an embattled D major, the same place as that from which it started. Ambivalence is sealed as the peremptory last three bars omit the major / minor third degree altogether. It even continues past the final double bar if the score is taken literally and the tam-tam strokes are allowed to ring on (though that is a highly tendentious interpretation, not supported by the earliest recordings, the people behind which should have known well enough what the composer wanted).

In interviews Rachmaninoff, ailing in health since long before the composition, referred to the *Symphonic Dances* as his 'last flicker'. Some flicker (to misquote Churchill's speech to the Canadian Parliament in December 1941)! Whatever the crepuscular shades this music traverses, it goes out in a blaze of glory. The wounds which Rachmaninoff had gathered in his career could not all be healed in real life, but in his music, they could be: symbolically, psychologically, even if only as wish-fulfilment, yet at the same time with such masterful craftsmanship that we can take profound inspiration from his effort.

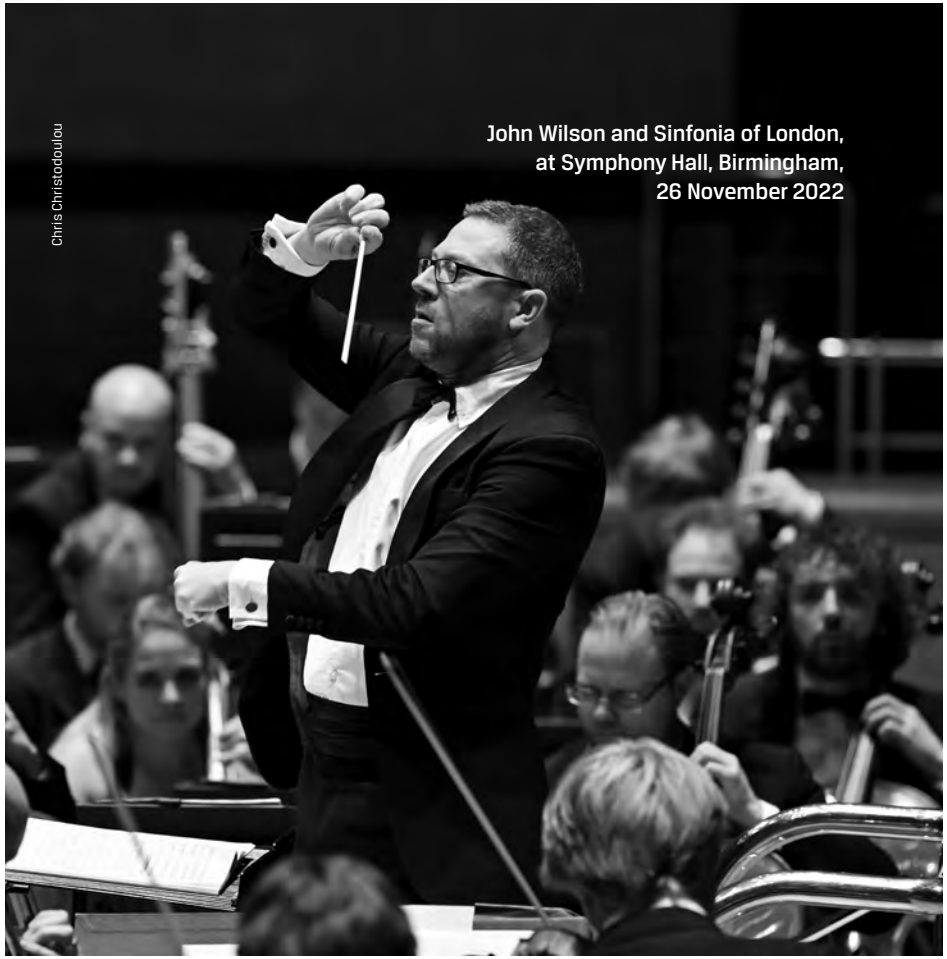
© 2025 David Fanning

Sinfonia of London brings together outstanding musicians for special projects, live and recorded, under its Artistic Director and conductor, John Wilson. Described in the press as 'one of the best ensembles anywhere' (*The Guardian*), it includes a significant number of principals and leaders from orchestras based both in the UK and abroad, alongside notable soloists and members of distinguished chamber ensembles. The orchestra made its acclaimed live début in 2021 at the BBC Proms. Alongside subsequent annual Prom appearances, it has given live performances at the Aldeburgh Festival and Snape Maltings, as well as two concert tours of the UK, cementing its reputation for world-class excellence with 'typically exhilarating performances' (*The Arts Desk*) and five-star reviews. Its much celebrated recording profile on Chandos Records covers a wide range of repertoire, including works by Korngold, Respighi, Ravel, Dutilleux, Strauss, Rachmaninoff, Walton, and Rodgers & Hammerstein. The magazine *BBC Music*


Alex ingram
John Wilson

declared that 'Wilson and his hand-picked band of musicians continue to strike gold with almost anything they turn their hands to' while *The Mail on Sunday* declared the album of English Music for Strings 'dazzling... some of the finest string playing ever put on disc by a British orchestra'. Alongside outstanding reviews ('leaves music critics ready to die for joy', in the words of *iNews*), the orchestra has received five *BBC Music Magazine* Awards in five years and, in 2022, a *Gramophone* Award. In 2023, *The Sunday Times* stated that 'Sinfonia of London sets the gold standard – an orchestra of generals that takes the unfashionable, the obscure, the overlooked, and makes it unmissable'. www.sinfoniaoflondon.com

Born in Gateshead and since 2011 a Fellow of the Royal College of Music where he studied composition and conducting, **John Wilson** is now in demand at the highest level across the globe and has over the past thirty years conducted many of the world's finest orchestras. In 2018 he relaunched Sinfonia of London, which *The Arts Desk* described as 'the most exciting thing currently happening on the British orchestral scene'. His much-anticipated BBC Proms début with this orchestra, in 2021, was praised by *The Guardian* as 'truly outstanding' and admired by *The Times* for its 'revelatory music-making'. They are now highly sought-after across the UK, the 2024 / 25 season notable for performances at major UK venues including the Barbican Centre, Bridgewater Hall, and Glasshouse International Centre for Music, as well as a return to the BBC Proms. Their large and varied discography having received near universal critical acclaim, in the autumn of 2024 they released their twenty-fourth album since 2019. Their CDs have earned several awards, including numerous *BBC Music Magazine* Awards: for recordings of Korngold's Symphony in F sharp (2020), Respighi's Roman Trilogy (2021), Dutilleux's *Le Loup* (2022), Rodgers & Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (2024), and works by Vaughan Williams, Howells, Delius, and Elgar, a disc which won the Orchestral Award and was chosen Recording of the Year. *The Observer* described the Respighi recording as 'Massive, audacious and vividly played' and *The Times* declared it one of the three 'truly outstanding accounts of this trilogy' of all time, alongside those by Toscanini (1949) and Muti (1984). In March 2019, John Wilson was awarded the prestigious Distinguished Musician Award of the Incorporated Society of Musicians for his services to music and in 2021 was appointed Henry Wood Chair of Conducting at the Royal Academy of Music.



Chris Christodoulou

John Wilson and Sinfonia of London,
at Symphony Hall, Birmingham,
26 November 2022

Also available

Rachmaninoff
Symphony No. 2 • Prélude in C sharp minor
CHSA 5309

Also available

Rachmaninoff
Symphony No. 3 • Vocalise • The Isle of the Dead
CHSA 5297

Also available

Strauss • Korngold • Schreker
Metamorphosen
CHSA 5292

Also available

Korngold
Symphony in F sharp • Theme and Variations • Straussiana
CHSA 5220

You can purchase Chandos CDs and DVDs or download high-resolution sound files online at our website: www.chandos.net

For requests to license tracks from this CD or any other Chandos products please find application forms on the Chandos website or contact the Royalties Director, Chandos Records Ltd, direct at the address below or via e-mail at mhewett@naxosmusic.co.uk

Chandos Records Ltd, Chandos House, 1 Commerce Park, Commerce Way, Colchester, Essex CO2 8HX, UK.
E-mail: enquiries@chandos.net Telephone: + 44 (0)1206 225 200 Fax: + 44 (0)1206 225 201

 www.facebook.com/chandosrecords

 www.x.com/ChandosRecords

Chandos 24-bit / 96 kHz recording
The Chandos policy of being at the forefront of technology is now further advanced by the use of 24-bit / 96 kHz recording. In order to reproduce the original waveform as closely as possible we use 24-bit, as it has a dynamic range that is up to 48 dB greater and up to 256 times the resolution of standard 16-bit recordings. Recording at the 44.1 kHz sample rate, the highest frequencies generated will be around 22 kHz That is 2 kHz higher than can be heard by the typical human with excellent hearing. However, we use the 96 kHz sample rate, which will translate into the potentially highest frequency of 48 kHz. The theory is that, even though we do not hear it, audio energy exists, and it has an effect on the lower frequencies which we do hear, the higher sample rate thereby reproducing a better sound.

A **Hybrid SA-CD** is made up of two separate layers, one carries the normal CD information and the other carries the SA-CD information. This hybrid SA-CD can be played on most standard CD players, but will only play normal stereo. It can also be played on an SA-CD player reproducing the stereo or multi-channel DSD layer as appropriate.

Microphones
Thuresson: CM 402 (main sound)
Schoeps: MK22 / MK4 / MK6
DPA: 4006 & 4011
Neumann: U89
CM 402 microphones are hand built by the designer, Jörgen Thuresson, in Sweden.

Acknowledgements
Many thanks to The Adrian Swire Charitable Trust and Peter and Judy Moorhouse for their generous support

Recording producer Brian Pidgeon
Sound engineer Ralph Couzens
Assistant engineer Alexander James
Editor Alexander James
A & R administrator Karen Marchlik
Recording venue Church of St Augustine, Kilburn, London; 9 and 10 January (*Symphonic Dances*) & 10 and 11 October (Symphony No. 1) 2024
Front cover *Ribbon with Squares* (1944), by Wassily Wassilyevich Kandinsky (1866 – 1944), now at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York © New Picture Library – De Agostini Picture Library / Bridgeman Images
Back cover Photograph of John Wilson © Astrid Ackermann
Design and typesetting Cass Cassidy
Booklet editor Finn S. Gundersen
Publishers Philharmonic Editions Ltd, London
℗ 2025 Chandos Records Ltd
© 2025 Chandos Records Ltd
Chandos Records Ltd, Colchester, Essex CO2 8HX, England
Country of origin UK

CHANDOS

Sinfonia of London/Wilson

CHSA 5351

CHANDOS DIGITAL CHSA 5351

SERGE RACHMANINOFF (1873–1943)

1-4 **SYMPHONY NO. 1, OP. 13** (1895) 44:16
in D minor · in d-Moll · en ré mineur
Edited by Ed Liebrecht

5-7 **SYMPHONIC DANCES, OP. 45** (1940) 33:09
Edited by John Wilson

TT 77:32

SINFONIA OF LONDON
Charlie Lovell-Jones leader

JOHN WILSON

© 2025 Chandos Records Ltd © 2025 Chandos Records Ltd Chandos Records Ltd • Colchester • Essex • England

SUPER AUDIO CD

SA-CD and its logo are trademarks of Sony.

Multi-ch Stereo

All tracks available in stereo and multi-channel

This Hybrid SA-CD can be played on most standard CD players.

CHANDOS

RACHMANINOFF: SYMPHONY NO. 1, ETC.

CHSA 5351