

Why Rachmaninoff Endures

(Summer 2002)

New York concertgoers discovered an unusual overlap in this season's programming: the two rival powerhouses of Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall both offered, as a primary focus of the season, the music of Russian composer Sergei Rachmaninoff. Even more unusual is that no noteworthy milestones in his life, the dully predictable rationale for most such programming, prompted the choice. It seems the music of Rachmaninoff struck both institutions as important because, despite decades of relentless sneering and savaging by the self-anointed musical elite, Rachmaninoff continues to escalate in both popularity and respect among performers and concertgoers, who ultimately have the final say on what will be heard.

Rachmaninoff, the critics said, was a throwback, a security blanket for those who lacked the sophistication to handle newer and more "difficult" music. Such ideological criteria evidently trumped what was obvious to anyone willing to look: Rachmaninoff was a first-rate innovator on a broad scale, with strikingly original approaches to melody, counterpoint, passagework, and orchestration. What doomed him in the eyes of the "progressive" critics was his reliance on lush, romantic harmony and unabashedly lyric sentiment, even if he appropriated each of these into a remarkably unique idiom.

Like the novelist Ayn Rand, dismissed by the establishment for parallel reasons, Rachmaninoff loved Hollywood, lived there, and was moved by the spirit of what it represented. A famous letter to a friend exults that a newly concocted melody "sounds like Hollywood", which he considered a high compliment. His music can perhaps be heard as an abstraction of the early Hollywood spirit, an emotional concretization of all that Hollywood's vision of life offered to the troubled world of the twenties and thirties. Also like Rand, Rachmaninoff accepted the idea that he was living outside of his times. The time may come when we reconsider this. The styles of Joyce, Webern, and Brecht are no longer much emulated, their works appreciated largely by academics and a small coterie of intellectuals; meanwhile, the ideas expressed in the words of Rand, the music of Rachmaninoff, and the visions of Hollywood flow directly into the culture that is not only that of modern America, but of all those in the world who love their lives and their freedoms.