



Rachmaninov

Symphony No. 2 in E minor

Scottish National Orchestra
Sir Alexander Gibson

collect

Sergey Vasil'yevich Rachmaninov (1873–1943)

Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27 (1907)
(Complete Version)

1	I Largo – Allegro moderato	17:38
2	II Scherzo. Allegro molto	9:12
3	III Adagio	13:19
4	IV Finale. Allegro vivace	13:25
		TT 54:00

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The initial disaster of Rachmaninov's symphonic career is well known: the First Symphony's structural defects (as its composer saw them) and Glazunov's unsympathetic and ill-prepared conducting had left the twenty-two-year-old composer ill and bereft of confidence. The full score, which he destroyed, was not resurrected until some fifty years later from the orchestral parts. Glazunov had indicated a cut of thirty-six bars, and Rachmaninov was never to regain complete confidence in his ability to sustain a symphonic argument, all too readily agreeing to cuts suggested by well-meaning but misguided colleagues. Thankfully, today's interpreters have tended to recognise such insecurity for what it was, and those of Rachmaninov's works which have previously fallen victim to the 'official' cuts (such as the Third Piano Concerto and the first two symphonies) are now rarely presented in anything other than complete form. Schoenberg's observation that 'to cut a long work is to be left with a long work cut, not a shorter one', is especially pertinent in the case of Rachmaninov's larger structures which, like Bruckner's, expand in proportion and in their own time. The present recording offers

the Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27 complete.

Much happened to Rachmaninov in the years between the first two of his three symphonies. In 1901 his cousin Alexander Siloti offered much-needed financial help, while almost a year earlier the First Piano Concerto had received its London premiere in the Queen's Hall (the pianist was Evelyn Stuart, the conductor Henry Wood who was to champion the Third Symphony). Then came the influential consultations with the hypnotist Dr Nikolai Dahl, out of the new-found confidence of which emerged the Second Suite for two pianos, the Sonata for Cello and Piano and – probably the greatest turning point towards recovery – the Second Piano Concerto. A year later Rachmaninov married his cousin and childhood friend Natalia Satina.

The optimism radiated by these events enriched the composer's life for several years and is abundantly apparent in the Second Symphony. Once again it was Rachmaninov's concern that composition should not be hampered by work as a performing musician, and this led him, in 1906, to resign his post as conductor of the Imperial Grand Opera in Moscow. The Rachmaninovs moved to a villa in

Dresden where, during the next few years, Sergey wrote some of his most imaginative music: *The Isle of the Dead*, the Piano Sonata, Op. 28, and this symphony.

A work of such length – however ample its store of melodies – would soon outstay its welcome if it were not for the masterly invention with which Rachmaninov develops his ideas, in particular the opening figure of seven notes on cellos and double-basses (no memorably angular, leaping motive this but, in common with many of the composer's most potent germinal ideas, a simple stepwise melody – such, throughout his life, was the influence of Russian Orthodox plainchant). Straightaway the violins take up their own version, and it is in this guise that they introduce the melody as the first subject of the *Allegro moderato*, the accompaniment worriedly brushed in by woodwind and *tremolando* lower strings. The stepwise shape even does duty for the more confident, major-key second subject, first heard on woodwind and at once warmly confirmed by strings. After an expansive, generously thematic codetta, momentum is gently regained as the music passes unhindered into the development.

Here the luxuriantly resourceful orchestration is full of thematic reference and interplay, while between the *tremolando* flurries on violins there is a hint (from cor anglais, then horn) of the triumphant theme

which is to bring the symphony to its close. Halfway through the development the music comes to rest as if taking stock of the proceedings. Rachmaninov is fond of this device: a point of uneasy repose, mirrored in similar places in the Cello Sonata and the Third Piano Concerto (immediately before the first movement's cadenza). The mood is that of the very opening of the symphony, confirmed on tuba by a *Dies irae*-like allusion to the opening figure. A spacious ascending sequence gradually lifts the music out of the impasse, with fragments of the stepwise figure on violins generating impetus towards the next climax – to think that such long-breathed transitional writing was once thought superfluous and accordingly omitted! The recapitulation dispenses with the minor-key first subject (all doubt having been cleared away by the restive development), and the cor anglais solo, now opulently doubled by strings, is linked with the second subject.

From a bird's eye view, the Scherzo is in ternary (ABA) form, yet it contains two well-contrasted themes and, after a crash, a trenchant, imitative middle section which takes its idea from the opening of the movement – at twice the speed. The reprise is straightforward and, with a deft *ppp* allusion (on cellos) to the clarinet figure heard before the movement's single broad melody, the music scurries into oblivion.

The *Adagio* embodies one of the most glorious of Rachmaninov's melodic inspirations. It opens – as if in mid-flow, yet hitherto unheard – with the ascending theme previously hidden in the early pages of the first movement's development and elsewhere, and which is to end the work in supreme confidence. Yet here it unfolds as if it had been written specially for the *Adagio* itself. But the heart of the movement lies in its clarinet melody, as seamless a flow of invention as Rachmaninov ever wrote, and one which returns on strings, its poignancy heightened, after a noble climax and several brief journeys to distant keys.

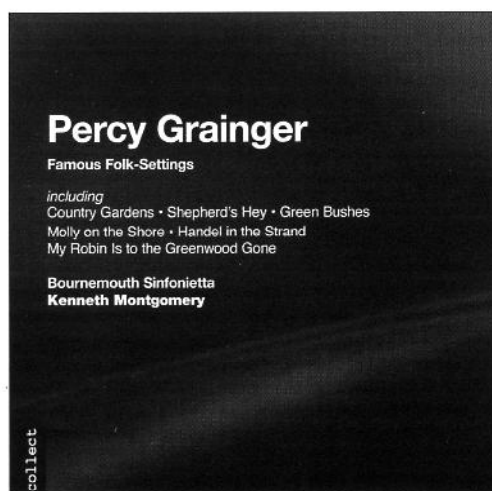
In the concluding *Allegro vivace*, as in most of Rachmaninov's finales (and in Russian symphonic finales in general), the minor key is

overthrown by its equivalent major. This is a movement of triumphant optimism, cast in the same emotional and rhythmic mould as the finale of the Cello Sonata. Particularly compelling is the gradual build-up of tension towards the recapitulation, with counterpoint and imaginative, half-lit scoring inseparably linked – yet there is no complex weaving of contrasting themes here, only a troop of descending scales, each marching at a different speed from its neighbours.

Unlike that of the unfortunate First Symphony, the highly successful premiere of the Symphony in E minor – in St Petersburg in January 1908 – enjoyed the authority of a thoroughly prepared and skilled conductor: the composer himself.

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(1873–1943)

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