

Rachmaninoff, Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27

COMPOSER: Sergei Rachmaninoff

BORN: April 1, 1873. Oneg, Russia.

DEATH: March 28, 1943. Beverly Hills, California.

COMPOSED: 1906-1907.

WORLD PREMIER: January 26, 1908. Saint Petersburg, Russia.

ABOUT THE COMPOSER: Sergei Rachmaninoff spent his life conducting, performing at the piano, and composing. Influenced by Tchaikovsky and other Russian composers, Rachmaninoff made an indelible mark on late Romanticism, with a style exuding rich expressiveness and tone color. After hearing liturgical chants as a child, he went on to use these in some of his music. Rachmaninoff may be best known for his piano and orchestra works, but he also composed choral and chamber compositions.

WHAT YOU'LL HEAR: Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2 in E Minor was composed following several years of writer's block, brought on by the difficulties he had with his first symphony. Unlike that premiere, the second symphony's first performance was a great success, with Rachmaninoff at the podium. Composed in four movements, this symphony is full of lyrical themes and rich orchestral colors. If you hear something ominous, it might be a variation on the "Dies Irae" (Day of Wrath) plainchant, which is hinted at several times.

The Largo-Allegro Moderato movement begins with a slow haunting theme that gradually transitions into a more uplifting melody. This does not last long, as stormier passages follow. The Allegro Moderato section sees the return of the theme from the Largo, but with the shift in rhythm it might take a moment to recognize.

In contrast to the long lines of the first movement, the opening of the Allegro Molto is rife with hurried rhythms and ostinatos. Listen carefully for the Dies Irae reference in the horns. This movement has a playful, scherzo-like quality and form, but the duple meter is unusual for a scherzo. After the initial energetic outburst, the clarinet leads the strings into a lyrical melody that temporarily transports us away from the scherzo's frenzy.

In the Adagio, the violins provide an introduction for the wistful clarinet solo. This theme is later carried in turn by the strings and winds. You will also hear a return of the main theme from the first movement, as well as a hint of the Dies Irae. Rachmaninoff's delicate treatment of the interplay between instruments creates several moments of shimmering light.

The jolting opening of the Allegro Vivace brings us out of the reverie from the Adagio. Lively and full of brilliant energy, the rhythms seem to trip over each other. Reminiscent of the second movement, this theme is full of phrases that rise and fall. As the music settles down, the strings soar once again with a dreamy, lyrical theme. The music becomes more serious when a darker minor key emerges with aggressive rhythms. Throughout this movement, Rachmaninoff recalls themes from earlier in the symphony before a final build-up that ends with the composer's signature rhythm.

*Our "Romantic Rachmaninoff" Program Notes are written by
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