

RACHMANINOV SYMPHONY NO. 2

Quick – what do Eric Carmen’s hit song “Never Gonna Fall in Love Again,” Don Sebeskey’s “You Can’t Go Home Again,” Barry Manilow’s “If I Should Love Again,” Danilo Perez’s “If I Ever Forget You,” and the film *Birdman* all have in common? Yes, the all “borrow” from Rachmaninov’s brilliant *Symphony No. 2*. While *Birdman* used parts of the first and second movement, it’s the third movement’s theme that inspired everyone else – and indeed, it is one of the most achingly beautiful themes in all of classical music.

I often wonder how people discover music. Do they read reviews? Do they take advice from friends? Do they just suddenly “know” all about classical music? Do they learn in school? I always ask and the answers are always varied and very different. I came to classical music thanks to a wonderful music appreciation class I took at Louis Pasteur Junior High School, taught by Mr. Williamson. The first piece he played us was Bedrich Smetana’s “The Moldau,” conducted by Eugene Ormandy. Mr. Williamson asked us to close our eyes and let the music wash over us and paint whatever pictures it conjured up in our imaginations. In other words, he told us nothing about what “The Moldau” was. I was hooked on classics from that moment on. Happily, one of my local record stores, Chesterfield in Beverly Hills, had very knowledgeable people working there and they’d recommend and suggest things to me and I learned a lot from them and from taking chances. I found right away that the music I responded to was mostly of the twentieth century, not the old fellows that everyone went on and on about – Mozart and Beethoven – just couldn’t get into that at all. But in all of those formative years neither they nor anyone else ever said the name Rachmaninov to me.

Flash forward to around 1975. At that point in time most of my musical interest was in soundtracks. I was driving home from a record collector friend’s house in Culver City, heading towards the 405 freeway. I pushed the buttons on the car radio trying to find something I liked, when suddenly the most glorious music was issuing forth from the speakers. I listened as I drove but I was so intoxicated by the tune I was hearing that I pulled over and stopped. And for the next twenty minutes or so I could not move, I could not do anything but listen to that incred-

ible music. And when it was done, the host of whatever program it was came on and informed us listeners that we’d just heard Rachmaninov’s second symphony, conducted by Adrian Boult on London Records. I knew Mr. Boult’s work because the second piece of music I bought on LP after “The Moldau” was *Fantasia on Greensleeves* by Vaughan Williams, conducted by Boult. Well, I immediately drove directly to Vogue Records in Westwood. They had a wonderful classical department there and I asked the man working there for the Boult version of Rachmaninov’s second symphony on London Records. Thankfully they had it and it was pretty inexpensive at that. I got home and immediately put it on and played it – as it turned out I’d missed the first two movements, so discovering those was wonderful. And then came the third movement, which is what had just begun when I switched to the station in the car. I must have listened to that record about ten times in a row that night. It instantly became my favorite symphony and that has never changed. I own or have heard, I imagine, just about every version commercially released on LP or CD, and some that weren’t commercially released (shhh). It rekindled my love of classical music and I went out and bought all the Rachmaninov I could and branched out from there – being obsessive I soon had over five thousand classical LPs.

I can’t imagine anyone reading these liner notes doesn’t know the story about the premiere of Rachmaninov’s first symphony, apparently such a disaster at its 1897 premiere, and with such savage reviews that it sent Rachmaninov into a depression that lasted years. He went into therapy and finally began to compose again. His first major composition after that was his second piano concerto (dedicated to his therapist), which was an instant success and remains one of the greatest and most well-loved and well-known piano concertos of all time. Confidence renewed and strong, he began writing what would become his second symphony. He composed throughout 1906 and finished the symphony in 1907, after many revisions. He himself conducted the premiere in Saint Petersburg in 1908, where it was met with much acclaim, the polar opposite of the reaction to the first symphony.

In 1909, Rachmaninov came to America for a concert tour, playing the piano and conducting. The tour was hugely successful and he was asked to do more engagements, which he turned down, as he didn’t want to be away from

home that much. That all changed in 1918. With the war on and Russia in turmoil, Rachmaninov accepted a series of concerts in Scandinavia. There he stayed until the tour was finished, and then he boarded a boat for the United States and arrived in New York City eleven days later. He became an in-demand conductor and performer, and also signed a deal to record for the Victor Talking Machine Company. Audiences loved him, but critics were divided on the worth of his music. Happily, time has proven them wrong, as is so often the case.

In 1941, Rachmaninov was asked to compose a short concerto for the British film, *Dangerous Moonlight* – he declined and the job went to Richard Addinsell, who did a brilliant job composing the Rachmaninov-like “Warsaw Concerto.” In 1942, he and his wife moved to Beverly Hills, California on the advice of his doctor. He fell ill during a concert tour and was later diagnosed with advanced melanoma. In February of 1943, he and his wife became American citizens. Seven weeks later, four days before his seventieth birthday, Sergei Rachmaninov passed away.

Through the years following the premiere, Rachmaninov made all sorts of edits to the symphony. Complete performances were almost unheard of until the late 1960s. The cuts to the complete approximately sixty-minute work sometimes reduced it to as little as forty minutes, sometimes even shorter. Which brings us to the performance on this disc – the legendary Hollywood Bowl concert of Leopold Stokowski conducting the Rachmaninov second symphony in August of 1946. In what was almost unheard of back then, Stokowski performed it without most of the usual cuts. The performance was electrifying. Thankfully, at the time there were transcription discs made of the performances for archival purposes. Back in the late 1970s, I happened to be in a used record store here in Los Angeles and I found a whole slew of reel-to-reel tapes, one of which contained the Hollywood Bowl concert. While I knew others had it and that whatever tapes existed would have all come from the transcription disc, the sound, while archival, was certainly listenable and that performance, despite the archival sound, became one of my all-time favorites.

In 1993, a CD was issued of the Stokowski performance and I bought it. It had worse sound than my tape and in those days there wasn’t

much that could be done, and so you hear every warble, every click and pop and tick – very difficult listening. I began to wonder if my tape could be cleaned up with today’s technology. We’d recently released two classic soundtracks, Franz Waxman’s *A Place in the Sun* and Dimitri Tiomkin’s *It’s a Wonderful Life*. Even five years ago it would have not been possible to release them, in such bad shape were the acetates and tapes. But audio restoration whiz, Chris Malone, worked some kind of magic and not only helped them but actually made them sound really good. So, if anyone could clean up this amazing performance it was him. And while there’s no mistaking that the sound is archival, he has worked his magic and made this listenable and when I heard the result of his labors I just sat there mesmerized by the music making and the music. I hope you listeners will agree that it was worth the time and effort (it took months) to now have this amazing performance available in the best archival sound possible.

Listening to the second symphony, it’s not impossible to imagine that Rachmaninov could have been an amazing film composer. The adagio could have underscored any number of classic romantic scenes in any number of classic films, just as the final movement’s opening could have underscored any of Errol Flynn’s swashbuckling adventures. But even though he never wrote music for film, his music has been used in some all-time classics. It is unthinkable to imagine David Lean and Noel Coward’s *Brief Encounter* without the Rachmaninov music. The second piano concerto was used to hilarious effect in Billy Wilder’s film of George Axelrod’s *The Seven Year Itch*. And of course the grandly romantic time-travel film *Somewhere in Time* (based on the novel by Richard Matheson) used Rachmaninov to very touching effect. The imdb currently lists Rachmaninov music used in over 180 films and TV shows.

ROBERT RUSSELL BENNETT CONCERTO FOR VIOLIN AND ORCHESTRA

As the companion piece to the Rachmaninov *Symphony No. 2* we offer the wonderfully melodic and sprightly Robert Russell Bennett *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra*, as conducted by Bernard Herrmann with the London Symphony Orchestra, with the great Louis Kaufman on violin, the man for whom Bennett wrote the concerto. As Robert Russell Bennett wrote: “When Louis Kaufman asked me to write a violin concerto he gave me quite a problem, as my weekly programme over the Mutual

Broadcasting System occupied all my time. The problem was solved by making the concerto one of my broadcasts. It is consequently a piece designed to be pleasant to hear on the air, or on the concert stage. No losing struggle with modern harmonic experiment is involved, and the solo part, though difficult, is well within the traditional literature of the virtuoso violinist. Written with the frankness of a letter to a friend, it says what it has to say for the pleasure of saying it. The form is classic, with nothing left out: the sonata-form first movement with the cadenza and quick coda; the slow movement with the rhythmic middle sections, and the dramatic finale. The one departure is a scherzo-humoresque between the slow movement and the finale, a sort of uninvited encore to the andante.”

Robert Russell Bennett was born in Kansas in 1894. He began his musical life playing the piano in dance halls and making arrangements of popular tunes, eventually becoming a conductor and band arranger and composer. But it was as orchestrator for any number of classic Broadway musicals that brought Bennett his fame, working with Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Cole Porter, but most importantly orchestrating all of the classic Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals, from *Oklahoma!* straight through to *The Sound of Music*. Of Bennett, Richard Rodgers said, “Russell’s musical taste is just about impeccable. He wouldn’t know how to put down a vulgar bar of music.”

It was long thought that this performance was lost, but when Bernard Herrmann asked Kaufman if he had a tape, Kaufman went rummaging and happily found that he did. While it wasn’t optimal in terms of sound, it was certainly okay and made the release possible. I issued that tape on its first CD release on my then-label Bay Cities. We did what we could back then and it sounded okay enough to release. We were releasing several discs of Louis Kaufman. He and his wife Annette were wonderful people and we all became friends. My favorite memory of Louis was him asking if he could come to the mastering session for the violin concerto. Of course I said yes. He listened and when the mastering engineer, Dan Hersch, was finished, we all looked at Louis. He smiled with a twinkle in his eye and said, “It sounds good – just put a little pepper on it,” meaning his violin sound. Dan turned some knobs and Louis was happy. That became my opening greeting to him whenever we spoke – “Put a little pepper on it.”

Louis Kaufman had this to say about Bennett: “Russell is one of the most gifted musicians I have ever known. Truly a major talent. We first met in 1936 at Universal Studios, when he had orchestrated the film version of Kern’s *Show Boat* and I was the concertmaster at the session. We have been friends ever since, and it would be difficult not to be a friend of this charming, energetic and remarkable man. His ability as a brilliant orchestrator is legend but I hope that this CD release of the *Violin Concerto* helps shed light on his equally fine abilities as a composer of wit and originality.”

Bernard Herrmann was a wonderful choice to conduct and it’s hard not to listen to the first movement of this tuneful concerto and not hear echoes of Herrmann’s own music for films like *The Devil and Daniel Webster*. For this release, Chris Malone has further cleaned up that original tape, most of which sounds fine – there was some unavoidable tape wear and damage at the top of the slow movement and a few instances of distortion, but it’s the music that counts, not to mention Louis’s beautiful playing, and it’s wonderful to have it back in print.

Finally, for those sitting there scratching their collective heads wondering what on Earth Sergei Rachmaninov has to do with Robert Russell Bennett, well, there is a connection: Rachmaninov was working on a two-piano reduction of his fourth piano concerto when he passed away. Bennett finished it at the request of Rachmaninov’s widow. Robert Russell Bennett passed away in 1981 and Louis Kaufman passed away in 1994.

I always find the best way to listen to archival recordings is to turn the lights off, sit, and pretend I’m a child again sitting by the radio listening to magical music coming from some magical place. Oh, and put a little pepper on it.

— Bruce Kimmel