

Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No. 2 – February 18, 2017

Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74 “*Pathétique*”

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky
1840-1893

The Sixth Symphony was Tchaikovsky's final completed work, premiered to a lukewarm reception on October 28, 1893 only nine days before the composer's death from cholera. Although its emotional intensity and title, *Pathétique*, suggest that this was yet another manifestation of the composer's periodic depression, or even a foreshadowing of his own death, the fact remains that Tchaikovsky was extremely pleased with this work from the moment he set to work on it. The Symphony's second performance was part of a memorial service for the composer, during which the audience seems to have suddenly perceived its significance.

Tchaikovsky's original conception was that the Symphony should have a program, much like Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, but he refused to specify what the program was, wanting the listener to guess it. His early, and by now well known, scenario for the program reads: “The ultimate essence of the plan...is LIFE. First movement – all impulsive passion, confidence, thirst for activity. Must be short. (Finale DEATH – result of collapse). Second movement, love, third, disappointment, fourth ends dying away (also short).” The final version can be understood to conform to this program only in part, and then only in the first and fourth movements.

Still intending to call his work a “program” symphony, Tchaikovsky accepted his brother Modest's suggestion of the Russian *pateticheskyy*, which the publisher insisted on translating into French, still the language of the Russian aristocracy and intelligentsia. The English reader, however, should be aware that the adjective *pathétique* actually means “highly emotional” and does not have the derogatory connotation of “pathetic.”

The Symphony opens with a low bassoon solo introducing the first theme in a ponderous and pessimistic Adagio. The melody is then taken up in a nervous Allegro and repeated by the successive sections of the orchestra. The emotional turmoil, however, is resolved in the second theme, among the most famous in the canon of memorable Tchaikovsky melodies. The theme was specifically meant to be a transformation of Don José's “flower aria” from *Carmen* – giving a hint as to the composer's negative emotional take on love.

The second movement is a “waltz” in 5/4 time, giving the impression of alternating bars of 3/4 and 2/4. Strangely enough, this meter works as a waltz, for despite its limping quality, one can imagine the alternating foreshortened 2/4 bars used for a lift or emotive pause, if the movement were actually to be used for dancing.

Like the first movement, the third is best known for its second theme, a sprightly march. As in the second movement, however, the composer utilizes an unusual metrical structure, creating an ambiguity between duple and triple time by composing the march in 12/8.

The Finale can be interpreted as taking up the symphony's original program. The opening theme, a series of short breathless, sighing motives, is a variation of the first theme of the opening movement. A programmatic interpretation of the movement suggests struggle and resignation upon the approach of the nothingness of death.

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18

Sergey Rachmaninov
1873-1943

Sergey Rachmaninov grew up in a middle-class musical family, but under strained economic conditions. His father, a gambler and an alcoholic, squandered the family's fortune to the point that eventually his mother and father separated, and she had to sell what remained of the family's assets and move into a small apartment in St. Petersburg. Sergey – whose care in better times would have been entrusted to a nanny – consequently grew up with little supervision.

His schooling suffered as a result. Although he showed early promise as a pianist and obtained a scholarship to study at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, the administration threatened to expel him for failing to attend classes. He subsequently transferred to the Moscow Conservatory where his mentor, Nikolay Zverev, discouraged his initial attempts at composing. Nevertheless, Rachmaninov continued to march to his own drummer, defying his teacher and transferring to classes in counterpoint and composition.

Clearly, his sense of his own worth was more accurate than that of his professors. While still a student, he produced a string of successful works, including the tone poem *Prince Rostislav*, his First Piano Trio, and a flood songs and piano pieces. For his graduation in 1892 he composed the opera *Aleko*, which won him the highest distinction, the Great Gold Medal. The same year he also composed the Prelude in C-sharp minor, a work whose inordinate fame haunted him all his life because audiences always expected – and demanded – it as an encore at his performances as one of history's greatest pianists.

By 1895 Rachmaninov felt confident enough to compose a symphony. The premiere took place in St. Petersburg in 1897 but was a dismal failure, in large part because to the shoddy conducting of Alexander Glazunov who was under “the influence.” Whereas earlier setbacks had produced in the young composer creative defiance, this disappointment brought on a severe depression. For three years he was unable to do any significant composing. After consulting numerous physicians and advisors, even asking old Leo Tolstoy for help, he finally went for therapy in 1900 to Dr. Nikolay Dahl, an internist who had studied hypnosis and rudimentary psychiatry in Paris. The result was one of the first well-known successes of modern psychotherapy. Although the composer was able to return to creative work, relapses into depression dogged him for the rest of his life. Significantly, all his large instrumental compositions are in minor keys, and one of the melodic themes recurring in many of his compositions is the *Dies irae* from the Catholic mass for the dead reminding mourners of the terrors of the day of judgment.

Rachmaninov expressed his gratitude to Dr. Dahl by dedicating the Second Piano Concerto to him. The first performance of the complete work, in November 1901 with the composer at the piano, was an instant success. It is Rachmaninov's most frequently performed and recorded orchestral work. It even found its way into Hollywood as background music to the World War II movie *Brief Encounter*.

The first movement opens with dark, plodding unaccompanied chords on the piano that increase in intensity and volume, gradually joined by the orchestra and leading to the first theme. The effect is like the tolling of the giant low-pitched bells common in Russian churches. The second broadly romantic theme is a Rachmaninov signature. The lyrical mood is sustained throughout until the coda with its sudden conclusion in a dramatic burst of energy.

In the *Adagio sostenuto*, muted strings, followed by the piano left hand hesitantly accompany the high woodwinds. The right hand then joins the woodwinds in dreamy interplay. After a brief energetic cadenza, the atmosphere of the beginning returns.

The beginning of the third movement in the lower range of the orchestra is deceptively gentle, enhancing the surprise of the sudden sparkling piano cadenza. The main theme, introduced by the violas and oboes, is intensely passionate – in the same vein as the second theme of the opening movement. After a surprisingly calm episode, the tempo increases to *presto*; and after another short cadenza the highest instruments in the orchestra take up the theme, culminating in a glittering climax.

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