

ASO Program Notes

Piano Concerto No 2 in C Minor

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873 – 1943)

Rachmaninoff was a very successful pianist and composer, in spite of bouts of severe anxiety and depression. In 1892, at the age of 19, he composed a piano prelude in C-sharp minor which became so popular that he could never end a concert without his audience demanding that he play it. He continued to ride this wave of acclaim, and when he premiered his First Symphony in 1897, he expected it to be well received. It was, however, a disaster. The conductor was said to be drunk and the orchestra woefully under-rehearsed. It was so bad that Rachmaninoff called it “the most agonizing hour of my life” and said that he hid in a stairwell with his hands over his ears. He tore up the only score and it was never played again in his lifetime. The incident triggered an extended period of depression and he wrote nothing for three years. Friends and family were so concerned that they suggested he travel to Paris to visit Dr. Nikolai Dahl, a specialist in using hypnosis to treat alcoholism, which had also become a problem for Rachmaninoff. Dahl’s primary objective became to get his patient back on track so that he could write a second major work. Through talk therapy and hypnosis Dahl succeeded, and Rachmaninoff dedicated his Piano Concerto No. 2 to Dr. Dahl.

The complete concerto premiered in November of 1901, and five days before that premiere Rachmaninoff suffered a temporary relapse, convincing himself that the work was worthless. He mastered his fears, however, and the introductory performance, with the composer at the keyboard, was a great success. It re-established his reputation as a major composer and performer. It became his signature piece, replacing the C-sharp minor prelude as the favorite of his fans.

The concerto opens with sweeping piano chords that gradually swell as the orchestra introduces the theme. After it is developed the piano takes on a solo theme. Then the strings return with the opening theme while the piano pounds out a visceral counter-theme. A solo horn seems to restore calm and a highly energetic coda ends the movement.

The second movement begins by quoting Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony, with the melody in the woodwinds and echoed in the piano. The piano subtly changes role from soloist to ensemble player. The momentum builds and after a brief cadenza, settles once more into the opening nocturne.

The finale begins with great excitement in E major and finally settles into C minor as the piano establishes the rhythm. A contrasting theme follows, with luxurious and alluring sound, and the last word is given to the piano in a brilliant coda.

Rachmaninoff enjoyed a highly successful career in North America, living and working in New York and recording his own works with the Victor Talking Machine Company. CDs of these performances are still in print today.

Beryl McHenry