



Sergei RACHMANINOFF

Symphonic Dances Op. 45

Sergei Vasilievich Rachmaninoff (April 1, 1873–March 28, 1943) was a Russian virtuoso pianist, composer, and conductor of the late-Romantic period, some of whose works are among the most popular in the classical repertoire.

Born into a musical family, Rachmaninoff took up the piano at age four. He graduated from the Moscow Conservatory in 1892 and had composed several piano and orchestral pieces by this time. In 1897, following the critical reaction to his Symphony No. 1, Rachmaninoff entered a four-year depression and composed little until successful therapy allowed him to complete his enthusiastically received Piano Concerto No. 2 in 1901. After the Russian Revolution, Rachmaninoff and his family left Russia and resided in the United States, first in New York City. Demanding piano concert tour schedules caused his output as composer to slow tremendously; between 1918 and 1943, he completed just six compositions, including *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Symphony No. 3, and *Symphonic Dances*. In 1942, Rachmaninoff moved to Beverly Hills, California. One month before his death from advanced melanoma, Rachmaninoff acquired American citizenship.

Early influences of Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Balakirev, Mussorgsky, and other Russian composers gave way to a personal style notable for its song-like melodicism, expressiveness and his use of rich orchestral colors. The piano is featured prominently in Rachmaninoff's compositional output, and through his own skills as a performer he explored the expressive possibilities of the instrument.

The *Symphonic Dances*, Op. 45, is an orchestral suite in three movements. Completed in 1940, it is Sergei Rachmaninoff's last composition. The work summarizes Rachmaninoff's compositional output. The work is fully representative of the composer's later style with its curious, shifting harmonies, the almost Prokofiev-like grotesquerie of the outer movements and the focus on individual instrumental tone colors throughout (highlighted by his use of an alto saxophone in the opening dance). The opening three-note motif, introduced quietly but soon reinforced by heavily staccato chords and responsible for much of the movement's rhythmic vitality, is reminiscent of the Queen of Shemakha's theme in Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *The Golden Cockerel*, the only music by another composer that he had taken out of Russia with him in 1917.

The *Dances* allowed him to indulge in a nostalgia for the Russia he had known, much as he had done in the Third Symphony,^[3] as well as to effectively sum up his lifelong fascination with ecclesiastical chants. In the first dance, he quotes the opening theme of his First Symphony, itself derived from motifs characteristic of Russian church music. In the finale he quotes both the *Dies Irae* and the chant "Blessed be the Lord" (*Blagosloven yesi, Gospodi*) from his *All-Night Vigil*.