



Sergei RACHMANINOFF

Capriccio Bohemien, Op. 12

Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninoff (1 April 1873 – 28 March 1943) was a Russian composer, virtuoso pianist, and conductor. Born into a musical aristocratic family, Rachmaninoff enrolled in piano lessons at age 4, and began studying at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory at age 10. A somewhat failing domestic life, however, distracted Rachmaninoff from his early studies, as two of his sisters would die from disease before the age of 18, and his father – who lost 4 of the 5 family estates through his financial incompetence and gambling habits – left the family to live in Moscow. Upon his struggles, his cousin, Alexander Siloti – an accomplished pianist studying under Franz Liszt – suggested for Rachmaninoff to study at the Moscow Conservatory under his strict former teacher, Nikolai Zverev. Rachmaninoff would go on to study under Siloti himself, and graduated from the conservatory a year early, requesting to do his final exams prematurely to avoid studying under a new teacher after hearing that Siloti was leaving Moscow. After launching his compositional career, Rachmaninoff fell into a depression after learning of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's death, who had agreed to conduct his tone poem, *The Rock* (1893). Through his struggles, Rachmaninoff cancelled a Russian tour, pawned a gold watch given to him by Zverev, and debuted his *Symphony No. 1* (1895) which was widely criticized – in large part due to conductor Alexander Glazunov's misuse of rehearsal time and possible drunkenness during the performance. Following a 3-year writer's block, Rachmaninoff would get counselling from Nikolai Dahl and compose his *Piano Concerto No. 2* (1901), which brought his musical career back on track. After splitting time as a successful conductor, composer, and pianist in Russia, Rachmaninoff became disinterested in the political turmoil of the time and moved to Germany in 1906, and would later move to the United States in 1918 following the beginning of the Russian Revolution. For the remainder of Rachmaninoff's life, demanding tour schedules limited his creative output, enabling him to only complete 6 compositions from 1918 until his death in 1943. With deteriorating health, Rachmaninoff moved to California in 1942 at his doctor's request and would pass away there a little over a year later.

Capriccio Bohemien, Op. 12 is a symphony poem written by Rachmaninoff in between 1892 and 1894, amidst his depression and immediately preceding his *Symphony No. 1*. Like his heavily lambasted debut symphony (and many of his other early works), Rachmaninoff's *Capriccio Bohemien* features many bombastic *a tutti* sections. Unlike Rachmaninoff's first symphony, however – which only became respected posthumously – *Capriccio Bohemien* premiered to critical acclaim. Continuing in the gypsy-oriented theme that Rachmaninoff found success with in his first opera, *Aleko* (1893), *Capriccio Bohemien* finds roots in the spirit that drives the Men's Dance in *Aleko* and in the aura of brooding that emanates from the opera.

The piece begins with a war-like percussion roll, and is reinforced by woodwinds and brass which provide a solemn harmonic context to the continuing beat. Higher winds join the mix before a quick crescendo into an explosive dance theme led by the string section. An alteration of the opening is revisited as the eruption dies down, receding to a "*Lento Lugubre, Alla Marcia Funebre*". A chromatic harmonic progression harkens back to one of Rachmaninoff's previous successes, his *Prelude in C# minor, Op. 3, No. 2* for solo piano. The ruminative middle section continues, developing an assortment of melodic themes that sound like they might be borrowed directly from Romani folk songs. Rachmaninoff – at the young age of 21 – orchestrates in an unabashedly reminiscent and poignant style, evoking a deep sense of longing that one could attribute to someone twice his age. In utter contrast with this section, an innocent and playful theme begins to develop, reflecting the joyful pleasures of the gypsy life. This new theme is then explored in a minor mode, with increasing Romani influence – including a harp that is played in a distinctly gypsy style. The energetic activity continues its ascent, with more prevalent use of tambourine, triangle, and snare drums, as well as rapid violin and wind runs. Rachmaninoff teases the listener with the first "ending", as a series of dramatic *tutti* chords makes way to a false minor resolution which explodes into a quick dance cadenza.