



Sergei RACHMANINOFF

Isle of the Dead, Op. 29

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.

Isle of the Dead, Op. 29 is a symphonic poem written by Rachmaninoff in 1908 in Dresden, Germany. The piece was inspired by a black and white photo of Arnold Böcklin's painting of the same name, which Rachmaninoff saw in Paris in 1907. Rachmaninoff was disappointed by the original painting when he later saw it, saying, "If I had seen first the original, I probably would have not written my *Isle of the Dead*. I like it in black and white." Böcklin created 5 versions of the painting, with the second version made for Marie Berna to commemorate her late husband, and the third version purchased by Adolf Hitler in 1933. The painting depicts a boat – carrying a lone coffin and a figure clad entirely in white – being rowed to the *Isle of the Dead*, a dark and foreboding island cemetery.

The piece begins with an irregular 5/8 time signature, perhaps depicting the paddling of oars, as the boat makes its way across murky waters. The opening mood is very bleak and distressing, with low strings playing an ominous ostinato giving the sense of rocking waves, and low woodwinds leading a funeral march-like swaying between two notes. The piece moves gently forward, opening into the higher registers of the orchestra while setting a more adventurous and mysterious tone. Before the music can open up fully, the opening low strings signal a return to the troubling beginning. The music builds once again, yet the next time we hear the opening strings, they come at the apex of tension, perhaps illustrating the long-awaited arrival to the *Isle of the Dead*. This seems to be confirmed shortly after, as a flute plays the *Dies Irae*, a Gregorian chant from the Mass for the Dead—a motto of mortality that recurs often in Rachmaninoff's music. Not before long, the music takes an unexpected lighter turn, with a dance-like melody led by joyous violins in triplets. This peaceful respite proves to be brief, as the tension builds until the brass bellows the *Dies Irae* once again. The darkness expands fully into a climax that might represent the delivery of the spirit to the underworld. The clarinets persevere with this theme, as they play an ostinato of the first four notes of the *Dies Irae* in spooky quietness, continuing onwards like a clock portraying the steadiness and surety of death. The 4-note figure is then carried into the strings, who manipulate it rhythmically. Despite numerous attempts to re-ignite the brief joyous dance heard earlier, the orchestra continually finds its way back to the dreary opening, dwindling down into a hopeless destiny.