

*Rachmaninoff and the Symphony*, by David Butler Cannata.  
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Paradoxically, considering his stature as a great composer and pianist, studies of Rachmaninoff's works have not developed in proportion to the popularity of his music. This can be explained, primarily, by the fact that his life was split between Russia, his homeland, and America, where he found refuge after the 1917 revolution. The exile frustrated Rachmaninoff's ability to compose. Accustomed to working in the romantic peacefulness of his estate, Ivanovka, or in his pleasant Moscow home, Rachmaninoff was almost unable to work on anything creative until 1933, when he built his villa "Senar" (abbreviation of Sergei and Natalie Rachmaninoff), on the Küsnachtersee, in Switzerland, which provided him with necessary conditions for sustained composition.

As it happened, Rachmaninoff's personal archive and manuscripts eventually found their way to the State Museum of Musical Culture in Moscow, and the Library of Congress in Washington. Divided manuscripts, and the existence of numerous revisions and editions based on different authorized versions (which also complicated copyright issues), made things very difficult for scholars and severely hindered serious research into his oeuvre.

This book is a pioneering work, in many ways filling in the gaps, and providing a reliable infrastructure for further exploration. The author has made a meticulous study of the sources, identifying and re-identifying many of them, and helping break through the silence to tell the story of Rachmaninoff's compositional process.

Modest in size, the book concentrates on Rachmaninoff's symphonic works, barely touching on anything else, even his piano concertos. The book begins with a biographical chapter, in which the author focuses on three great facets of the musician's talent: composition, pianism and conducting, as well as their interconnection in his life. Summarizing Rachmaninoff's activity before his emigration, Cannata observes that he exerted a unique influence in almost every sphere of musical life in Moscow between 1892 and 1917.

The writer reflects on the major incidents influencing Rachmaninoff's compositional work, and presents two events that he sees as turning points. The first of these was the famous fiasco of Rachmaninoff's *First Symphony*—the great disaster that caused him to lose his compositional self-confidence. The second event, of great significance to Rachmaninoff as a composer, was the breakdown with his family in Dresden between 1906 and 1909. During this time, he devoted himself entirely to composition, and his newfound freedom allowed him to re-evaluate his compositional style. At that period, Rachmaninoff composed the *Second Symphony* and the *Isle of the Dead*.

Without going into specific details, Cannata makes some intriguing references to Rachmaninoff's relations with the Soviets in the later years after his emigration. However, the author makes no reference to the intelligence circulating in Russia regarding Rachmaninoff's generous financial support to Russia during World War II, which apparently ended the prohibition against his music there, and allowed the Russian people to accept him as a great national composer.

In the same chapter, Cannata gives a detailed account of the sources he has used, and analyzes documentary evidence of the major musical influences on Rachmaninoff: Liszt, Wagner and Tchaikovsky.

The second chapter, “Working method,” begins the fascinating journey into the compositional process. The author first carefully examines and classifies the different kinds and formats of music paper used by the composer for his various works. This appears to be significant, since even the choice of paper and the number of prepared bifolios already reflected the composer’s initial idea of the future composition. Moreover, the study of the paper used has helped scholar to date and attribute unclear fragments of composer’s sketches. The sections on sketches, drafts, and legible manuscripts follow, each of them providing much useful information about Rachmaninoff’s creative laboratory. As Cannata concludes at the end of the book, “the comprehensive nature of Rachmaninoff’s drafts indicates that he had already conceived the composition in his mind before the drafting process. The miscellaneous sketches that precede these drafts were for him no more than *aides-mémoire*” (p. 120). Rachmaninoff’s “compositions were almost fully formed as early in the process as the draft stage. This indicates that he possessed a remarkable capability to manipulate the various musical perspectives.... Invariably, his initial conception of any given work proved the most successful” (p. 131).

Chapter 3, “Compositional development” considers the *First* (1895) and the *Second* (1907) symphonies, *Isle of the Dead* (1909), and *The Bells* (1913) all to be Russian period scores. Cannata’s particular area of interest is the tonal strategy of Rachmaninoff’s music. In his analysis, the author often compares Rachmaninoff with Tchaikovsky, affirming that the two composers had much in common. However, the influence of Liszt and Wagner, mentioned in the first chapter, is not discussed (except for one small allusion on p. 70). The author’s analysis leads him to conclude that Rachmaninoff “composed each successive symphonic work faster and he was increasingly more satisfied with the end result. This is most apparent after he composed *Isle of the Dead*, the most important piece in his development as a creative artist” (p. 132).

Chapter 4, “Revisions,” based on the author’s knowledge of compositional method, is the highlight of the study. Making an exception, Cannata reflects here on Rachmaninoff’s *First Piano Concerto* Op. 1, of 1891. The composer embarked on the revision of this early piece soon after the tremendous success of his *Second Concerto*. This marked Rachmaninoff’s returning to composition after the crisis caused by his fiasco with the *First Symphony*, and his successful treatment, under hypnosis, by a student of Freud, Dr. Nicolai Dahl. He subsequently modified the *Second Symphony* and the *Isle of the Dead*. Exploring the composer’s method of revision, Cannata discovered that Rachmaninoff constantly re-instated material that he had taken out earlier in the hope of achieving a quick improvement.

Finally, the fifth chapter presents an essay on *The Third Symphony*. The author focuses on this work, seeing it as an analogy to Tchaikovsky’s *Pathétique*, the masterpiece at the zenith of that composer’s oeuvre. The chapter opens with a detailed description of the sources, continues by tracing the conception of musical ideas, and concludes with an analysis of tonal structure.

The book is a valuable one, and makes an essential contribution to Rachmaninoff studies. The fundamental review of sources and detailed exploration of Rachmaninoff’s compositional process elevates research in this field to a new level. It is also a fine methodological case study for working with primary sources.