

Dissertation Abstract  
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The Russian composer Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943) has long occupied a prominent place in the concert repertoire, but his critical standing has been ambiguous: some have viewed him as one of the greatest of his time, while others have strongly questioned the value of his music. Although many writings on the composer note this paradox, his critical reception has not previously been the subject of a thorough independent study, and, as a result, there is little consensus concerning its basic ideological, temporal, and geographical circumstances. This dissertation begins the task of elucidating Rachmaninoff’s international critical reception by examining his treatment in 226 music lexicons published from 1900 to 2013 in eleven European languages, employing a straightforward mode of reception history within the theoretical context of canon formation.

The dissertation presents two principal findings. First, the ideological composition of the critical reception is more complex than has generally been believed. Rachmaninoff’s music was disparaged not only by modernists, who found it old-fashioned, but also by nationalists, who considered it cosmopolitan for not adhering overtly to the idiom of the *kuchka*, as well as from the broader critical standpoint of classicism itself—that is, from the nexus of values that has defined the tradition of Western “classical music” since the nineteenth century. Second, this criticism notwithstanding, most critical evaluations of the composer, as in music lexicons, have been affirmative. Rachmaninoff elicited not a single negative assessment in the genre until 1938, and Eric Blom’s oft-cited belittling of the composer in the 1954 edition of *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians* was exceptional for its period. The highest concentration of negative assessments occurred in the 1970s on the European continent. These still constituted a minority,

however, and the same decade also witnessed the rise, in Great Britain, of an affirmative reappraisal of the composer in music lexicons that would spread, by the early-twenty-first century, to every region surveyed. A new international consensus emerged as negative assessments were replaced with affirmative ones and those that were already affirmative increased in detail and favorability.