

The University of Southern California

Department of Musicology

**Rachmaninoff in Music Lexicons, 1900–2013:  
Toward a History of the Composer's Reception**

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by

**Keenan A. Reesor**

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### A Note on Russian Transliteration

Russian names and words have been transliterated in this dissertation using a simple modified version of the ALA-LC scheme that does not employ any diacritical marks. Unidirectional apostrophes and double quotation marks represent the Russian soft sign and hard sign respectively and should be interpreted neither as stray punctuation marks nor, as they are in some other schemes, as diacritical marks. Exceptions to this scheme include the names of Russian persons for whom certain romanized spellings have long been established in Anglo-American literature. The spelling *Rachmaninoff*, which the composer himself used, has been adopted by the Library of Congress Authorities and has been employed here everywhere in the body text to avoid visual confusion, even in quotations of English-language sources and of translated excerpts from foreign-language sources that employ other spellings. The various spellings used in foreign-language sources have been retained, however, in the original texts provided in the footnotes and also in the bibliography, including the direct Russian transliteration *Rakhmaninov*. Russian characters rendered obsolete by the post-Revolutionary orthographic reforms have been transliterated using their homophonous counterparts.

### A Note on the Citation of Music Lexicons

In order to avoid unnecessary clutter, publication information and locators for the numerous music-lexicon entries on Rachmaninoff cited in this study have not been provided in footnotes. Rather, information sufficient for locating lexicons in the bibliography has been provided in the body text, and the entries themselves can be found under the composer's name, which in Cyrillic is spelled *Рахманинов* and is always transliterated with the stems *Rac-*, *Rak-*, or, rarely, *Rah-*. The normal citation practice for lexicons has been employed, however, for entries not on Rachmaninoff, unless otherwise noted, and the small number of encyclopedic works that are not arranged alphabetically have been cited appropriately.

For the sake of textual clarity, abbreviated words, which so abound in music lexicons, are restored here to their full forms without the use of brackets, both in quoted material and in the original texts of translated quotations.

Finally, in order to achieve a more precise chronology, assessments are cited in the text by the year in which they appeared, which in the case of multivolume works often does not correspond to the publication years of the whole work as they appear in the bibliography.

## Introduction

### Rachmaninoff, Canonicity, and Music Lexicography

I came to know Rachmaninoff's music the same way that many have in the past. Among the yellowed, tattered piano scores passed down in my family was *the* Prelude in C-sharp Minor, which in our lore stood on the threshold of accomplished pianism. The piece loomed over the early years of my study, much as Rachmaninoff himself loomed on its cover, his dour yet mysterious expression seeming to confirm his rumored struggle with depression. The movies played their part, too. Having learned the prelude, I took no particular interest in Rachmaninoff's music until a few years later, when his Third Piano Concerto played a starring role in the 1996 hit Australian drama *Shine*. Like other films that have featured his music, *Shine* tells a story in which love conquers all: the young pianist David Helfgott experiences a nervous breakdown after performing the "Rach 3," which he had learned in a futile attempt to win the approval of his oppressive father, but his self-confidence is ultimately restored by his marriage to a woman who both loves him and believes in his talent. Helfgott's personal triumph seemed to find the perfect analog in a concerto that suggests overcoming not only in the progression of its themes and harmonies but also in its transcendent technical virtuosity. This all proved a winning combination for the movie-going public—it certainly did for me—and Rachmaninoff's Third became, for a time, a popular phenomenon.

Gaining exposure to the concerto through the film not only inspired me to practice longer and harder; it led me for the first time into the domain of musical commentary. Young, inexperienced, and inspired, I was wholly unprepared for what I encountered in the criticism that swelled around *Shine* but what members of my parents' generation might have remembered from reviews of the 1980 American romance *Somewhere in Time* and what members of my

grandparents' generation might have remembered from reviews of the 1945 British romance *Brief Encounter*: namely that critics have had reservations about Rachmaninoff's music for a long time, and that cinematic appropriations of it have tended to aggravate and elicit those reservations.

I have searched in vain for the article that introduced me to this state of affairs twenty years ago, but I have never forgotten it. The author explained that he was once one of those for whom Rachmaninoff's Third Concerto could evoke "a salty Russian tear," one who had been so openly obsessed with the work that his classmates had inserted its title into their inscriptions in his junior-high yearbook but who had, alas, ultimately grown up and defected to "the side of the critics." Imagine my naïve confusion upon reading this: I was, at that very time, one of those obsessed teenagers! A conversation with my piano teacher, a professor at the local university, did not help my confusion: when I told her that my favorite composer was Rachmaninoff, her only remark was that his works were "showpieces."

All this was nothing, however, by comparison with Bernard Holland's derisive *New York Times* editorial on the music featured in *Shine*, which I discovered only later. "I haven't gone to see the movie *Shine*, and I probably won't," wrote Holland. "The idea of losing one's mind over the Rachmaninoff Third Piano Concerto is simply too offensive." The story might be true and even uplifting, he remarked, "but music lovers: how can you get excited about a cozy piece of schlock like this? . . . Treating 'Rach 3' with awe, *Shine* lowers musical values to fast-food levels."<sup>1</sup> He was echoed by Mark Swed in the *Los Angeles Times*, who, commenting on the film, described the concerto as "a popular showpiece that has some fiendishly difficult piano writing

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Holland, "Basking in the Glow of the Golden Arches," *New York Times*, December 22, 1996. See also Holland, "The Limits of Bait and Switch," *New York Times*, February 23, 1997.

in it, some clever use of instrumental sonorities, and some sure-to-please gushy melodies. It certainly can be an effective piece,” he wrote, “. . . but great art it isn’t.”<sup>2</sup>

I also didn’t know then that harsh criticism of Rachmaninoff’s music such as this was nothing new. The idea that his music is beneath serious consideration received its iconic expression in his entry in the 1954 edition of *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, a statement, in fact, to which Swed’s commentary bears a striking resemblance. There, the British critic and lexicographer Eric Blom, also the edition’s general editor, asserted that, as a composer, Rachmaninoff was old-fashioned, lacked distinctive national and individual features, and was technically “highly gifted, but also severely limited.” Blom further described the composer’s music as “well constructed and effective, but monotonous in texture, which consists in essence mainly of artificial and gushing tunes accompanied by a variety of figures derived from arpeggios.” To these pronouncements he added a negative prognosis: “The enormous popular success some few of Rachmaninoff’s works had in his lifetime is not likely to last, and musicians never regarded it with much favor.”<sup>3</sup>

The experience of falling in love with Rachmaninoff’s music only to learn that to do so was considered by some to be immature, uncritical, or both planted a question in my mind, the one that lies at the foundation of this dissertation: How could Rachmaninoff’s music enjoy the obvious veneration represented by enshrinement in the time-tested concert repertoire, in addition to widespread popularity, and at the same time be the subject of critical scorn? In reality, this question entails several others: Why didn’t these critics like the music, and who were they? Was distaste for Rachmaninoff’s music a hallmark of critical or scholarly professionalism, or was it

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Swed, “The Reality of ‘Shine’: An Image Distorted,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 22, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> This entry is reproduced in full and discussed at length on pp. 73–88 below.

the product of some independent ideology? Was it as widespread as it seemed, and if so, how did the music survive? Finally, how do the answers to these questions bear on Rachmaninoff's general standing in musical life?

As these questions suggest, the objective of this study is *not* to take sides in a debate about the quality of Rachmaninoff's music, my continuing interest in it notwithstanding. Quality in music cannot be proved but only postulated in reference to accepted values, the adoption of which is inherently subjective. Rather, this study approaches Rachmaninoff's critical reception as a composer from a historical viewpoint, embracing a paradigm that accommodates positive and negative opinions alike in an effort to understand both, and it will yield objective conclusions grounded in documentation. Whether or not one agrees with Blom, for example, one can make an honest effort to understand his views and assign them a place within a historical pattern.

Firm answers to the preceding questions will not be found in existing writings about Rachmaninoff, because there has never been a general study of his international critical reception. This is genuinely ironic, because that subject is easily the most ubiquitous issue in the literature about him published in the West. Introducing an article or book with a smattering of past critical zingers is virtually an article of faith in Rachmaninoff studies; doing so is not only easy and effective but also supplies a ready context for new research—any new study can be framed as a reappraisal in the broader context of the composer's critical reception. As a result, commentary on the reception has been closely bound up with critical evaluation itself. Whether this tendency has succeeded in improving the composer's standing is open to question,<sup>4</sup> but it has

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<sup>4</sup> According to Glen Carruthers, reappraisals of Rachmaninoff's music have paradoxically perpetuated the need for further reappraisal, "since [they] have, more often than not, become mired in the same paradoxes, contradictions, and fallacies—plus some new ones—that gave rise

certainly generated a good deal of confusion. Habitually relegated to the ancillary parts of articles and books, commentary on Rachmaninoff's critical reception has been passing and cursory, languishing in a state of vagueness concerning basic documentary facts.

We might ask, for example, *who* has typically disliked Rachmaninoff's music and *why*. One gathers from existing commentaries that it was any participant in musical life with an intellectual or progressive outlook, but these notions are couched in extremely general terms. Commenting briefly on Rachmaninoff's reception in his foreword to Victor Seroff's 1950 biography of the composer, Virgil Thomson observed that "the only kind of success [Rachmaninoff] never knew was that of intellectual distinction," and that his music was "often distasteful to musicians, [who] tend[ed] to find it a retreat from battle, an avoidance of the contemporary problem."<sup>5</sup> Seroff suggests a similar state of affairs in the book itself.<sup>6</sup> In a 1951 article advocating a more progressive view of the composer, Joseph Yasser attributed "misconceptions" concerning Rachmaninoff's music to "composers of the extreme musical 'left'" and "a fair number of professional musical observers" who fell under their influence.<sup>7</sup> In their 1956 biography of the composer, Sergei Bertensson and Jan Leyda quoted dismissive statements about Rachmaninoff by Paul Rosenfeld and Edward Sackville-West, suggesting that

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to the need for reappraisal in the first place." Carruthers, "The (Re)Appraisal of Rachmaninov's Music: Contradictions and Fallacies," *Musical Times* 147 (Autumn 2006): 50.

<sup>5</sup> Virgil Thomson, foreword to *Rachmaninoff*, by Victor I. Seroff (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), xii. Thomson's other writings make it clear that he held this view himself.

<sup>6</sup> Seroff, *Rachmaninoff*, 219–20.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Yasser, "Progressive Tendencies in Rachmaninoff's Music," *Tempo*, n.s., no. 22 (Winter 1951–52): 24–25.

these typified the composer's treatment in "intellectual American [and English] criticism."<sup>8</sup> In a 1968 *New York Times* editorial observing the twenty-fifth anniversary of the composer's death, Harold Schonberg wrote that Rachmaninoff "was a composer who unabashedly used 19th-century models for his music, and as a result has been all but dismissed by scholars, historians, tastemakers, and professionals."<sup>9</sup> In 1973, John Culshaw, recounting the writing of his 1949 book on the composer, wrote that "it proved highly undesirable even to mention the name of Rachmaninoff in London musical circles in 1946," that "in academic circles his music was regarded with contempt."<sup>10</sup> In 1987, Stephen Wigler cited "musical progressive[s]," adding that these "were the people who taught at the conservatories and who wrote reviews for the most influential newspapers."<sup>11</sup> Terry Teachout reiterated many of these same ideas in 2002, but suggested that it was the emotionalism of Rachmaninoff's music, rather than its conservatism per se, that elicited a negative response. "For those listeners who are made uncomfortable by the straightforward expression of emotion in classical music," Teachout wrote, "his name will always be a synonym for vulgarity." Then, having quoted the Sackville-West criticism from the Bertensson and Leyda biography, he adds, "But less priggish critics (one is tempted to say, less English critics) no longer find it necessary to make excuses for Rachmaninoff."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Sergei Bertensson and Jan Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music* (New York: New York University, 1956; repr., with a new introduction by David Butler Cannata, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 218.

<sup>9</sup> Harold Schonberg, "'Rachmaninoff? Well, I mean . . .'" *New York Times*, April 14, 1968.

<sup>10</sup> John Culshaw, "Rachmaninov Revisited," *Soundings* 3 (January 1, 1973): 2.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Wigler, "Let's Stop Bashing Rachmaninoff," *Baltimore Sun*, January 11, 1987.

<sup>12</sup> Terry Teachout, "What Was the Matter with Rachmaninoff?" *Commentary*, June 2002, 50–51.

As these statements show, generalities concerning one aspect of Rachmaninoff's critical reception often intermingle with others. For example, the question of *where* the reception was unfavorable has elicited even less comment than its *who* and *why*. With very few exceptions, commentators simply assume that Rachmaninoff's standing was the same everywhere and that any change in it in one place registered universally. The statements in the previous two paragraphs illustrate this well enough. The fact that Teachout ventured only in parentheses to locate Rachmaninoff's critical opposition in England is indicative of the ambiguity that prevails over the geographic aspect of the reception. Similarly rare and unremarkable is Thomson's further statement in his foreword to the Seroff biography that "Rachmaninoff . . . has been adopted since his death as a Russian classic master in Russia."<sup>13</sup> Some commentators limit the scope of their comments to their own region or time—Culshaw, for example—but such are the exception rather than the rule. There are also two focused discussions that present some useful findings for certain periods in certain regions—Geoffrey Norris's brief 1995 article "Rachmaninoff's Reception in England, 1899–1938" and Pauline Fairclough's recent discussion of Rachmaninoff's reception in Soviet Russia between 1931 and 1945—but neither these nor any other commentaries venture substantive comparison of Rachmaninoff's critical reception in more than one region.<sup>14</sup> Russian commentators, for their part, have been preoccupied for so long with specialized studies of Rachmaninoff's music that it seems not to have occurred to them that his international critical reputation was ever in question.

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<sup>13</sup> Thomson, foreword to *Rachmaninoff*, xi.

<sup>14</sup> See Geoffrey Norris, "Rachmaninoff's Reception in England, 1899–1938," *Studies in Music from the University of Western Ontario* 15 (1995): 49–58; and Pauline Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses: Shaping Soviet Musical Identity under Lenin and Stalin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 89–90, 185–91.

Most confusingly of all, while most commentators agree that Rachmaninoff has suffered critical neglect, they are at complete odds with each other concerning *when*, or even *if*, it came to an end. His “rehabilitation,” as Teachout termed it, seems always to have been just on the horizon. Yasser, for example, to return to his article of 1951, believed that a period when the composer’s “basic creative course was not fully understood” was coming to an end, that he was then “gradually taking his place in music history.”<sup>15</sup> This belief was shattered by the appearance, in 1954, of Blom’s dismissive assessment in *Grove*’s. Culshaw dated the favorable reversal of Rachmaninoff’s critical fortunes to “the middle of the nineteen-sixties,” when his music “had not only retained its public appeal, but had become accepted by a different generation of scholars and artists, who found no embarrassment in embracing the work of a composer whose style was out of step with his period.”<sup>16</sup> Yet Stephen Walsh still found it necessary in 1973 to rebut the *Grove*’s entry and “attempt a more balanced judgment of Rachmaninoff’s place in twentieth-century music,” concluding that the composer had at last passed “the test of time.”<sup>17</sup> Still, nothing seemed to change: Richard Coolidge opened his 1979 article on Rachmaninoff’s concertos with the observation that “today . . . the most ‘out’ of the ‘out’ composers and the primary target of all the ‘fashionable’ scoffers is undeniably Sergei Rachmaninoff”—an assertion that he substantiated with several quotations.<sup>18</sup> In his 1990 biography of the composer, Barrie Martyn suggested that negative critical attitudes toward Rachmaninoff’s music persisted

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<sup>15</sup> Yasser, “Progressive Tendencies,” 24.

<sup>16</sup> John Culshaw, *Putting the Record Straight: The Autobiography of John Culshaw* (New York: Viking, 1982), 77.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Walsh, “Sergei Rachmaninoff, 1873–1943,” *Tempo*, n.s., no. 105 (June 1973): 12–14, 21.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Coolidge, “Architectonic Technique and Innovation in the Rakhmaninov Piano Concertos,” *Music Review* 40 (August 1979): 178–81.

until the mid-1970s, and in 1993 he declared confidently that “the half-century since his death ha[d] restored him to critical respectability.”<sup>19</sup> The vitriolic response to *Shine*, which appeared just three years later, casts doubt on this claim, as does David Cannata’s statement, made in 1998, that Rachmaninoff was “somewhat of an enigma” who “has only slowly gained a place in the communion of composers thought worthy of serious attention.”<sup>20</sup> The trend has continued into the twenty-first century: in 2002, the same year that Teachout declared, like Walsh, that Rachmaninoff had “stood the test of time,” Alfred Brendel could be found flatly describing the composer as “a waste of time” whose music bordered on “kitsch.”<sup>21</sup>

Recent scholarship has done little to resolve the ambiguity surrounding Rachmaninoff’s critical reception. As before, elucidation has not been the primary objective, and conclusions on the subject have been ventured on narrow documentary bases, perpetuating existing generalizations. Some tirelessly bear the timeworn standard of Rachmaninoff apologetics forward, employing various scholarly means in an effort to effect a broader reassessment of his legacy. The implication of such a study is that the composer remains misunderstood, that his critical standing is still ambiguous.<sup>22</sup> In his 2008 article advocating a twentieth-century view of the composer, Charles Fisk concludes from a trio of statements by Orlando Figes, Francis Maes, and Richard Taruskin that, “in America and Western Europe, a commonly held critical view of

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<sup>19</sup> Barrie Martyn, *Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1990), 16–17, 18n21; Martyn, “The Legacy of Rachmaninoff,” *Clavier* 32 (March 1993): 17.

<sup>20</sup> David Butler Cannata, *Rachmaninoff and the Symphony* (Innsbruck: Studien, 1999), 13–16.

<sup>21</sup> Teachout, “What Was the Matter with Rachmaninoff?” 51; Alfred Brendel and Martin Meyer, *Me of All People: Alfred Brendel in Conversation with Martin Meyer*, trans. Richard Stokes (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 42, 161–62, 251–52.

<sup>22</sup> The notion that Rachmaninoff remains misunderstood has been argued explicitly as well. See Carruthers, “The (Re)Appraisal of Rachmaninov’s Music,” 44–50.

Rachmaninoff still persists today: that he was fundamentally a blinkered nineteenth-century composer, a holdover from the past who was able to achieve spectacular success far and wide with audiences who shared his reluctance to advance musically into the twentieth century.”<sup>23</sup>

Such an approach is evident also in Robin Gehl’s 2008 dissertation, “Reassessing a Legacy: Rachmaninoff in America, 1918–43,” which argues that Rachmaninoff’s lively participation in American musical life following his emigration from Russia constitutes a sufficient basis for according him greater historical significance. Whereas most of the commentators cited above have tended to attribute Rachmaninoff’s alleged neglect to critics, Gehl focuses throughout her commentary on “musicologists,” who, she writes, “have largely dismissed him as a touring virtuoso and conservative, part-time composer,” and she makes repeated reference to his omission from the “academic canon.”<sup>24</sup> She bases these assertions on a survey of a few English-language music histories and various editions of *Grove’s*.<sup>25</sup> Surveying the latter, Gehl implies that Blom’s dismissive assessment in the 1954 edition reflects the modernistic disposition of the age in which it was published, a period she describes in passing as “the height of modernism.”<sup>26</sup>

Others, by contrast, suggest that the composer is no longer in need of defending and that it is time to move on. Thus reasons Blair Johnston in the opening sentences of his 2009

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Fisk, “Nineteenth-century Music? The Case of Rachmaninov,” *19th-Century Music* 31 (April 2008): 248. Efforts to situate Rachmaninoff’s music in the twentieth century began as long ago as the Winter 1951–52 issue of *Tempo*, in the article by Yasser already cited (see n. 7 above) and in another one by William Flanagan, “Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Twentieth-century Composer,” 4–8.

<sup>24</sup> Robin S. Gehl, “Reassessing a Legacy: Rachmaninoff in America, 1918–43” (PhD diss., University of Cincinnati, 2008), ii, 3, 202–03.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–6.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

dissertation, “Harmony and Climax in the Late Works of Sergei Rachmaninoff.” “Rejecting a cherished modus operandi of Rachmaninoff scholars,” he writes, “I will not begin this study with a defense of the composer. If recent trends can be trusted,” he continues, “the scholarly tide has turned and a fuller reckoning of his achievements may be forthcoming. The brutal dismissal of the composer in the fifth edition of *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians* has been supplanted by Geoffrey Norris’s far more sympathetic account in recent print and online editions, and . . . several high-grade dissertations and books have appeared during the last quarter-century.”<sup>27</sup>

Johnston’s call to abstain from further comment on Rachmaninoff’s critical reception is reasonable, I feel, insofar as such comment is deemed necessary to justify study of his music. The premise of this dissertation, however, is that Rachmaninoff’s critical reception remains ambiguous and demands elucidation, even if Johnston proves right, unlike past commentators, and the composer’s critical fortunes really have at last turned the corner. Unfortunately, whether or not “recent trends can be trusted” is precisely what has proven so difficult to tell, indeed whether circumstances such as those that Johnston names can be considered trends at all. The image one constructs of Rachmaninoff’s critical reception merely reflects one’s data, and the fewer the data, the less reliable the image. Connecting the dots from Yasser to Martyn to Teachout, for example, would suggest that Rachmaninoff’s music has traveled a path of critical self-fulfillment, but connecting the dots from Blom to Swed to Brendel would suggest precisely the opposite. It is just such an insufficiency of data that explains the conspicuous level of disagreement among the foregoing accounts of Rachmaninoff’s critical reception. Taken

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<sup>27</sup> Blair Allen Johnston, “Harmony and Climax in the Late Works of Sergei Rachmaninoff” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2009), 1. Johnston’s dissertation is one of the most enlightening theoretical studies of Rachmaninoff’s music in the English language.

individually, none of them may seem unreasonable, but together they are hardly practicable. Even if we dismiss the *when* and *where* in order to salvage the seemingly more certain *who* and *why*, these accounts yield a dubious image of Rachmaninoff: a composer historically unloved and unappreciated—“*never* [emphasis added] regarded . . . with much favor,” if we are to believe Blom—by any listener, performer, critic, or scholar with progressive or intellectual pretensions, a composer essentially devoid of critical approval.

We can conclude on the basis of ground already covered that this image is illusory. The very commentators who have decried Rachmaninoff’s allegedly poor critical treatment have often been authoritative musical commentators themselves, their appeals on his behalf often published in prominent periodicals. Schonberg was one of the major American music critics of the second half of the twentieth century; in addition to publishing some very popular books on music (some of them translated into other languages), he wrote in some of the country’s most widely read publications, most notably the *New York Times*, where he was chief music critic from 1960 to 1980. It was during that period that he wrote his editorial on Rachmaninoff cited above, not long after which he received the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism. Teachout has written continuously on the arts since the mid-1980s, for such magazines as *Harper’s* and *Commentary*, contributing also to the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, and he is the author of several well-received books on prominent figures in the arts. The journals *19th-Century Music* and *Tempo* (which featured the articles of Fisk, Walsh, and Yasser) are highly distinguished in their respective areas, as was *The Music Review* (which featured Coolidge’s) until its discontinuation in 1994. Walsh himself has emerged as a significant British commentator, having written music criticism for the *Daily Telegraph*, the *London Times*, and the *Observer*, in addition to having written the definitive English-language biography of Stravinsky. Norris has likewise

distinguished himself with scholarly work on Rachmaninoff and music criticism in the *London Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*. If critics and scholars have frequently been blamed for undervaluing Rachmaninoff, they must also be numbered among his noteworthy advocates.

The first step in elucidating Rachmaninoff's international critical reception as a composer is thus to establish its documentary facts: Who said what about Rachmaninoff, when, where, and why? This approach, a straightforward mode of reception history, will offer quantifiable data concerning the extent, both geographically and temporally, to which Rachmaninoff's music has been praised or disparaged and the historical bases for doing so.<sup>28</sup> The documentation and analysis of critical assessments will not, however, reveal how Rachmaninoff's music paradoxically withstood critical disapproval, retaining and even increasing its place in the concert repertoire over time, nor will it offer a means to evaluate his historical standing in general musical life, since musical commentary is only one constituent of the latter. The second step in elucidating Rachmaninoff's critical reception is thus to analyze his reception in musical commentary in relation to his reception in the repertoire and other aspects of musical life, with consideration of any relevant musical or extra-musical factors.

Unlike the first step, this one requires some conceptual explanation, since it entails consideration of how the various groups that make up musical life interrelate in the overall determination of musical value over time. Just who directs this mysterious process is a matter of great contention. In asserting that Rachmaninoff had passed the "test of time" (that seemingly obvious but conceptually elusive term), Walsh and Teachout both implied that continuing

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<sup>28</sup> This study does not employ reception history as a means for evaluating or interpreting musical works. For a discussion of the latter, see Carl Dahlhaus, "Problems in Reception History," chap. 10 in *Foundations of Music History*, trans. J. B. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 150–65. Nor does this study employ reception history in order to effect critical reevaluation, the subject of Leon Botstein's article "Music in History: The Perils of Method in Reception History," *Musical Quarterly* 89 (Spring 2006): 1–16.

performance, whether in concert or on record, is ultimately a more reliable or important indicator of musical value than critical approbation—that is, that performers, by virtue of the music they choose to perform, and audiences, who validate that choice in the form of ticket and record sales, possess the ultimate authority to assign that value. This is a view likely to be shared by performers and audiences themselves. Works that have passed the test of time in this sense are considered by some to constitute a “canon” of classical music, as they are, for example, in David Dubal’s 2001 book *The Essential Canon of Classical Music*. As Dubal explains, the book grew out of his years as a classical radio broadcaster for WNCN-FM in New York, when “many listeners wrote or called to request that [he] write a book that might guide them through the classical music repertoire,” which he describes as the “best-known works” of the most famous composers. To Dubal, performing and listening are the activities that define the canon, not critical study. “This is not,” he writes, “a book of analysis.” Rather, the book “codifies the essential canon” in order to “suggest a lifetime listening plan.”<sup>29</sup>

An opposite view of authority in musical life is implicit in the field of music criticism, which is founded on the premise that critics possess critical faculties superior to that of lay concert-goers, their presumed readership, as well as that of performing musicians and even composers, whose work they take it upon themselves to evaluate. This basic dichotomy between practitioners and listeners, on the one hand, and connoisseurs, on the other, can be traced to Greek and Roman antiquity, whatever differences in other aspects of musical culture may separate these eras from our own. In *The Politics*, Aristotle described criticism as the pinnacle of musical experience, a practice ideally preceded by a long period of performing by critics themselves. Aristotle regarded such a critic as a person of “quality” and a “gentleman,” while

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<sup>29</sup> David Dubal, *The Essential Canon of Classical Music* (New York: North Point Press, 2001), 5–6.

professional performers were dismissed as “paid employee[s]” who were caught up with “common” listeners in a mutually detrimental, self-perpetuating cycle of indulgence in “vulgar pleasure” and “popular music such as appeals to slaves, children, and even some animals.”<sup>30</sup>

Writing several hundred years later, Boethius similarly dismissed performing musicians as manual laborers akin to “slaves.” He, like Aristotle, placed the musical critic at the top of musical life. To him, performers are, by definition, “separated from the understanding of musical knowledge, . . . for they use no reason, but are totally lacking in thought.” Similarly, composers work “not so much by thought and reason as by a certain natural instinct” and are thus “also separated from music.” One who judges music, by contrast, “is devoted totally to reason and thought, [and] can rightly be considered musical.”<sup>31</sup>

In much the same vein, some critics of recent times have viewed the concert repertoire as little more than the product of consciously manipulated market forces in a commercialized music industry, a view expounded acerbically by Virgil Thomson in his 1939 book *The State of Music*. There Thomson dismissed the association between repertoire and value as subjective, arguing that the romantic symphonic works that then formed the core of the repertoire were regarded as the “best” music merely because of “the popularity of the symphony orchestras (plus their gramophone recordings and radio transmissions) performing this repertoire.”<sup>32</sup> Thomson held an extremely cynical view of musical life, one in which the concert repertoire, the classical-music

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<sup>30</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics*, rev. ed., trans. T. A. Sinclair and Trevor J. Saunders (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1981), 307–316, quoted in Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin, eds., *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Schirmer, 2008), 9–10.

<sup>31</sup> Calvin Martin Bower, “Boethius’s *The Principles of Music*: An Introduction, Translation, and Commentary” (PhD diss., George F. Peabody College, 1967), 101–04, quoted in Weiss and Taruskin, *Music in the Western World*, 31–32.

<sup>32</sup> Thomson, *The State of Music* (New York: William Morrow, 1939), 127.

recording industry, and the music-appreciation movement were fellow cohorts in a scheme whose ultimate objective was not to educate or uplift but to indoctrinate more and more potential listeners with a subjective vision of musical “taste” in order to ensure the continuing economic success of the music industry as a whole. According to Thomson, the “standardized” symphonic repertoire (about “fifty pieces,” in his estimation) went hand in hand with the standardization of “the conductors, the players, the soloists,” a process that he believed served the social and financial interests of the symphony orchestra, especially of its conductors and management.<sup>33</sup> He went so far as to claim that “the standardization of repertory . . . is not a result of mere supply and demand [but] has been reached by collusion between conductors and managers.”<sup>34</sup> “The symphony orchestras,” Thomson concluded, “are the king-pin of the international music-industry. Their limited repertory is a part of their standardization. The Appreciation-racket is a cog in their publicity machine.”<sup>35</sup> Needless to say, according to this view, participation in the repertoire is well nigh irrelevant to value, and authority in musical life dwells in the hands of the critic.

Critics are not, however, the only musical commentators who claim authority in critical affairs; scholars do, too. In the first place, scholars have often written criticism, including such eminent musical writers of the last two centuries as François-Joseph Fétis, Hugo Riemann, Gerald Abraham, and Richard Taruskin. While the aims of musicology have, strictly speaking, lay apart from critical evaluation, the two have often intermingled, sometimes overtly. Joseph Kerman, for example, was a devoted advocate of a scholarly mode of criticism and was in turn

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 127–28.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

strongly associated with the so-called critical musicology that emerged in the late twentieth-century.<sup>36</sup> Even in their principal historical or analytical work, scholars exercise and express critical discrimination in their choice of what music to study. The place of honor accorded the Viennese classicists and the Three Bs—with Beethoven at the center of both groups—in scholarly literature of all types clearly illustrates the type of critical judgments that emerge from scholarly researches. Scholars have also laid claim to critical authority in ideological terms, as Carl Dahlhaus did when he defined canon formation as “the transition from journalism to historiography.”<sup>37</sup> According to this view, music historians have, quite literally, the final word in matters of critical evaluation.

Composers, for their part, tend to express their claim to critical authority in writing, becoming in that instance musical commentators themselves. It is true that when one composer emulates another in composition, the former increases the authority of the latter, but surely this emulation, when conscious at all, is rarely intended as a direct expression of critical approval. Rather, composers have proven, Boethius to the contrary, to be among the most vigorous literary contributors to musical life. Thomson serves as a convenient example, as a composer who, like his colleague Aaron Copland, tended toward an intellectual type of journalistic criticism. But history shows that composers engage in critical discourse in a number of other guises as well, from the philosopher to the theorist to the historian, as a survey of the writings of such composers as Vincenzo Galilei, Jean-Philippe Rameau, Richard Wagner, and Milton Babbitt will show, to name but a few.

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<sup>36</sup> Kerman posited this brand of criticism in his classic article “How We Got into Analysis, and How to Get Out,” *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Winter 1980): 311–31, and brought this perspective to bear in various ways on musicology in his similarly classic reflection on the discipline, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

<sup>37</sup> Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History*, 161.

Thus, all parties in musical life consider themselves autonomous in critical evaluation; when opinions differ, anyone may claim superior judgment at will. An article written in 1962 by the popular mid-century American critic B. H. Haggin, “Music Criticism and Scholarship,” illustrates the inadequacy of rigid conceptualizations of critical hierarchies in musical life. Haggin opens by quoting an article by Hungarian-American musicologist Paul Henry Lang in which the latter accuses American critics of propagating “a thick tangle of prejudices, inherited formulas and catchwords, a prodigious lack of information, and an unbelievable ignorance of musical literature.”<sup>38</sup> Haggin devotes the rest of his article to settling the score. With the assistance of a letter from an unnamed lay correspondent bewailing instances of alleged inaccuracy and questionable musical judgment in well-known books on music by Lang and Alfred Einstein, another prominent musicologist of the time, Haggin unleashes a pitiless assault on the two scholars, the premise of which is that they, like most members of their profession, mistakenly equate “*knowledge about*” a work of art with “*perception of*” it, the former representing the proper domain of the scholar and the latter of the critic.<sup>39</sup> Adding examples of his own to those of his correspondent, Haggin turns Lang’s statement back on himself and Einstein, accusing them, in certain instances, of being not only “poor critics” but also “poor scholar[s],” and of dispensing “misinformation,” concluding that, “if one judges by Einstein’s and Lang’s performances, writing about music for the enlightenment of the general public doesn’t seem the right activity for musical scholars.”<sup>40</sup> What might be the right activity, he asks?

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<sup>38</sup> Paul Henry Lang, “Ecce Criticus,” *American Scholar* 7 (Autumn 1938): 480. For Haggin’s treatment of the quotation, see his “Music Criticism and Scholarship,” *American Scholar* 31 (Summer 1962): 423.

<sup>39</sup> Haggin, “Music Criticism,” 423–24. The italics are Haggin’s.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 424, 426, 430.

Haggin takes his answer from Virgil Thomson: “the thing for the musicologists to do [is] to teach musicology.”<sup>41</sup> Scholar dismisses critic, critic and non-professional dismiss scholar: in practice, no critical hierarchy exists.

Owing to this state of critical anarchy, any attempt to situate all but the most central composers within the canon, prioritizing the interests of any one constituent group in musical life over the others, would prove meaningless; each group tends to embrace a view of the canon that reflects its own interests. Asserting that Rachmaninoff has passed the test of time because his music continues to be performed is nothing more than a truism, a tacit expression of a performance-based view of the canon. Such an assertion explains virtually nothing about the composer’s critical standing in particular or about his standing in musical life generally. From this point of view, the differing degrees of importance (or unimportance) accorded Rachmaninoff in musical literature can be regarded simply as manifestations of differing views of the canon.

Adopted as a concept rather than an entity, however, canon or canonicity—as opposed to *the canon*—*can* serve to illuminate a composer’s general standing in musical life when conceived as the product of multiple factors. In other words, a composer’s standing might be meaningfully calculated by taking into account neither performance nor criticism in isolation but performance and all forms of commentary together, as well as any other activity that positively or negatively affects a composer’s legacy. Such a multifaceted view of canonicity reflects current musicological thinking. Although canonicity was conceived primarily in terms of musical commentary when it first entered musicological discourse in the 1970s and 1980s,<sup>42</sup> publications

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 430.

<sup>42</sup> Dahlhaus’s definition of canon formation, which was first published in 1977 and is cited on p. 17 above, is self-evident. Kerman, while acknowledging the traditional association between repertoire and canon, nevertheless drew a sharp distinction between the two: “repertoires are

of the 1990s explored a variety of other contributing factors. The collection of essays *Disciplining Music: Musicology and Its Canons* offers a vivid snapshot of this wide-ranging approach to the subject.<sup>43</sup> Certain reception studies published since that time illustrate the utility of a multifaceted conceptualization of canonicity in illuminating a composer's reception in musical life.<sup>44</sup>

More direct investigation of canon per se can be found in two essays in another edited collection from the 1990s, *Rethinking Music*, which have strongly influenced the present author's conception. These approach the subject from complementary angles. William Weber's contribution, "The History of the Musical Canon," embraces an empirical approach to the subject, reflecting the material and socio-institutional orientation of his research.<sup>45</sup> Whereas my preceding discussion of canon and authority in musical life applies principally to the fully formed world of "classical music" that emerged in the course of the nineteenth century, Weber identifies three major types of canon that have varied in prominence and interrelatedness at

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determined by performers, canons by critics." Kerman, "A Few Canonic Variations," in "Canons," special issue, *Critical Inquiry* 10 (September 1983): 112.

<sup>43</sup> See Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman, eds., *Disciplining Music: Musicology and Its Canons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). The essays explore canon in various contexts, including non-classical musics, neglected repertoires, and disciplinary tendencies, among others. For another study of canon written in this spirit, see Marcia J. Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, the four essays on Beethoven's reception in Glenn Stanley, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Beethoven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 239–305; and James Deaville, "Liszt and the Twentieth Century," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt*, ed. Kenneth Hamilton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 28–56.

<sup>45</sup> See Weber, *Music and the Middle Class: The Social Structure of Concert Life in London, Paris, and Vienna* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1975; 2nd ed., Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics in Eighteenth-century England: A Study in Canon, Ritual, and Ideology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Weber, *The Great Transformation of Musical Taste: Concert Programming from Haydn to Brahms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

different points in the history of Western music. These are (1) “a *scholarly* canon, whereby music is studied in theoretical terms,” that is, “philosophical and scientific consideration of music, such as that discussed in treatises and taught in the medieval quadrivium”; (2) a “*pedagogical* canon,” consisting of works emulated, beginning with sacred polyphony in the sixteenth century but broadening significantly during the nineteenth; and (3) a “*performing* canon,” beginning in the eighteenth century and involving “the presentation of old works organized as repertoires and defined as sources of authority with regard to musical taste.”<sup>46</sup> The general premise of Weber’s essay is that, “if [musicologists] are to understand the canon historically, [they] must become skeptical of it,”<sup>47</sup> and indeed the importance that he attaches to the performing canon stands in stark contrast to the traditionally authoritative attitude of the music scholar. “Performance,” he writes, “is ultimately the most significant and critical aspect of musical canon. While editions and anthologies figured significantly within the pedagogical and critical aspects of this problem, what emerged as the core of canonicity in musical life, beginning in the eighteenth century, was the public rendition of selected works. . . . A performing canon is more than just a repertory; it is also a critical and ideological force.”<sup>48</sup> While finding Kerman’s distinction between repertoire and canon useful in some respects, Weber deems it “simplistic.” “We cannot,” he continues, “write off musicians as shapers of the canon.”<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, Weber argues that canon consists of four distinct aspects that work in combination to imbue a work or composer with canonic authority: craft, conceived primarily as contrapuntal mastery; repertory,

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<sup>46</sup> Weber, “The History of the Musical Canon,” in *Rethinking Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 339–40.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 349

the continuing performance of distinguished old works; criticism, the force that “empowers” repertory on its way to canonicity; and ideology, by which a musical canon acquires moral, spiritual, and civic authority.<sup>50</sup>

Whereas Weber approaches canon from an empirical and historical perspective, Mark Everist does so from a more theoretical one in his contribution to the volume, “Reception Theories, Canonic Discourses, and Musical Value,” arriving nonetheless at a similarly multifaceted view of canon. Like Weber, Everist challenges Kerman’s rigid distinction between repertory and canon, as well as the priority that Kerman accords critics in the process of canon formation. “This curious formulation assigns a more important role to the critic and a less important role to the performer than each seems to deserve,” writes Everist, arguing also that performance, criticism, and composition “can be embodied in the same individual.”<sup>51</sup> Synthesizing literary and musical canonic discourses with reception theory, Everist adopts a holistic theory of canon formation in which “locations of reception overlap substantially with contingencies of value.” This is highly technical language, to be sure, but what Everist means is that canonicity derives from a complex web of receptive acts that serve to perpetuate a composer’s legacy in various ways, including not only performance and criticism but also other institutional activities concerned with the reproduction of texts and documents such as books, musical scores, and recordings.<sup>52</sup>

In short, what is needed to elucidate Rachmaninoff’s critical reception in its relation to other branches of musical life is nothing less than a comprehensive history of the subject. This

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 341–54.

<sup>51</sup> Mark Everist, “Reception Theories, Canonic Discourse, and Musical Value,” in Cook and Everist, *Rethinking Music*, 387–88.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 402.

history must be international in scope and based on a wide array of data, including critical assessments from all the principal genres of musical commentary (i.e., criticism, lexicons, histories and historical surveys, biography, and analytical literature), each of which approaches evaluation in its own way; performance and recording statistics; manifestations of his reception in broader culture such as lay assessments (chiefly in correspondence of various kinds, only more recently in online public media), the formation of societies, competitions, websites, and publications in his honor, and appropriations of his music in popular media; and, insofar as such might be identified and obtained, information concerning other factors that have impacted his legacy, such as political actions and circumstances, personal animosity or jealousy, and editorial influence, among others.

Writing this history is the objective of my ongoing research. The present study supplies a foundation for that research by introducing the conceptual parameters of Rachmaninoff's critical reception through an exhaustive survey of music lexicons. Modern music lexicography began only in the eighteenth century; until that time, independent musical compendia were rare, and the lexicographical treatment of musical subjects often occurred in general compendia or in subsections of various musical treatises.<sup>53</sup> What eventually defined lexicography in music, as it had in other fields, was the encyclopedic principle, "a fierce natural urge," as James Coover called it, "to compile and compact the knowledge of the world or of a special interest into handy

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<sup>53</sup> James B. Coover and John C. Franklin, "Dictionaries and Encyclopedias of Music," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., 7:306. Coover's article just cited (to which Franklin contributed only partially) is the single most authoritative source on music lexicons in the English language and represents, as Vincent Duckles noted, "the distillation of a lifetime of bibliographic work on the genre." Duckles and Ida Reed, *Music Research and Reference Materials: An Annotated Bibliography*, 5th ed. (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 1.

compendia in order to control it.”<sup>54</sup> It is this pretension to the mastery of knowledge that gives lexicons their traditional authority in society.

While many types exist, “a simple way of classifying music dictionaries for purposes of discussion,” as Vincent Duckles wrote, “is to separate those which deal with terms from those which are concerned with biography.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, these basic categories are represented by two seminal eighteenth-century works, Sébastien de Brossard’s terminological *Dictionnaire de musique* (1703) and Johann Mattheson’s biographical *Grundlage einer Ehren-Pforte* (1740), while a third, Johann Gottfried Walther’s *Musicalisches Lexikon* (1732), combined both terms and persons in alphabetical order and thus “became the prototype for all comprehensive music encyclopedias that followed.”<sup>56</sup> All subsequent music lexicons can be regarded as one of these types or a related subtype, all of which had appeared by the early-nineteenth century.<sup>57</sup>

Biographical music lexicons were, however, sporadic until the late-eighteenth century,<sup>58</sup> when the genre came into its own with Ernst Gerber’s monumental *Historisch-biographisches Lexikon*

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<sup>54</sup> Coover and Franklin, “Dictionaries,” 7:306.

<sup>55</sup> Duckles, “Some Observations on Music Lexicography,” *College Music Symposium* 11 (Fall 1971): 116.

<sup>56</sup> Coover and Franklin, “Dictionaries,” 7:310. Although music encyclopedias, like music dictionaries, are typically arranged alphabetically, this is not always the case, as Lavignac’s *Encyclopédie de la musique et dictionnaire du conservatoire* illustrates.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 7:313–15. Within these basic parameters, music lexicons of a seemingly endless variety have been written. The subgenres named in the chapter on music lexicons in Duckles’s *Music Reference and Research Materials* illustrate this variety: general; international biography; nationally oriented dictionaries; biographical dictionaries: indexes; terms; country, jazz, popular, and folk music; opera, theater, and film music; musical instruments: makers, performers, and terminology; sacred music; quotations; compositional devices; and, finally, lists and handbooks. Duckles and Reed, *Music Research and Reference Materials*, v–vi, 1–114.

<sup>58</sup> Coover, *Music Lexicography*, 3rd ed. (Carlisle, PA: Carlisle Books, 1971), xvi; Coover and Franklin, “Dictionaries,” 7:313.

*der Tonkünstler* (1790–92; new ed., 1812–14). This work paved the way for such similarly monumental works as Joseph-François Fétis’s *Biographie universelle des musiciens* (1835–44; 2nd ed., 1860–65), Robert Eitner’s *Biographisch-bibliographisches Quellen-Lexikon der Musiker und Musikgelehrten* (1900–04), and Theodore Baker’s *Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* (9 eds., 1900–2001).<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, the work of Walther, Mattheson, and Gerber, among others, also prefigured the development of musical biography as an independent literary genre.<sup>60</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century, the demand for music lexicons increased in tandem with the rapidly increasing international development of public and professional musical life, leading to an unprecedented proliferation of music lexicons during the twentieth century.<sup>61</sup> Emblematic of this increasing demand are two comprehensive works that were published at the same time during the late-nineteenth century, Sir George Grove’s *Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1st ed., 1879–90) and Hugo Riemann’s *Musik-Lexikon* (1st ed., 1882), each achieving renown in its own sphere. As Grove explained, “a strong desire is felt by a large, important, and increasing section of the public to know something of the structure and peculiarities of the music which they hear and play . . . [and] of the biographies and characteristics of its composers.”<sup>62</sup> Rejecting the exhaustive single-handed approach of Gerber and Fétis, Grove brought together numerous writers and aimed for encyclopedic

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<sup>59</sup> Coover, *Music Lexicography*, 3rd ed., xv–xvi; Coover and Franklin, “Dictionaries,” 7:313–16.

<sup>60</sup> See Hans Lennenberg, chaps. 2, 5, and 6 of *Witnesses and Scholars: Studies in Musical Biography* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1988), 18–37, 66–116.

<sup>61</sup> By the end of the twentieth century, the average number of music lexicons published each year had risen to nearly one hundred, up from eight per year in the nineteenth century. Coover and Franklin, “Dictionaries,” 7:315.

<sup>62</sup> Grove, preface to *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1:v.

comprehensiveness, producing a four-volume work “based as far as possible on independent sources” at the expense of “much time, and laborious, disinterested research” that he claimed contained information on “all the points . . . on which those interested in the Art, and alive to its many and far-reaching associations, can desire to be informed”<sup>63</sup>—claims the dictionary maintains to this day.<sup>64</sup> Riemann, on the other hand, brought together scholarly excellence and critical shrewdness in a single, eminently usable and attractive volume. This combination proved both popular and versatile: within twenty-five years of its original publication, his *Musik-Lexikon* had appeared in six German editions and been translated into Danish, English, French, and Russian, edited in each case to reflect the musical life of the region. Works such as Grove’s and Riemann’s could supply a documentary basis for musical literature of many other types, including criticism, history, and biography.

While the traditional aim of terminological music lexicography has been to supply unambiguous definitions and explanations, biographical music lexicography has rarely been limited to the mere documentation of the basic facts of a person’s life and work. As Warren Allen noted of Walther, Mattheson, and Gerber, “the activities of these men are linked up more or less with musical criticism,”<sup>65</sup> and the same can be said of Fétis, Riemann, and subsequent lexicographers such as Percy Scholes, with his *Oxford Companion to Music* (1st ed., 1938), Eric Blom, editor, as we have seen, of the fifth edition of *Grove’s* (1954), and Nicolas Slonimsky,

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:v–vi.

<sup>64</sup> *The New Grove* “seeks to discuss everything that can be reckoned to bear on music in history and on present-day musical life” and was “written by almost 2,500 people,” specialists in their fields. Stanley Sadie, preface to the 1980 edition of *The New Grove*, reprinted in the 2nd ed., 1:xii, xiii.

<sup>65</sup> Warren Dwight Allen, “Lexicons, Dictionaries, and Encyclopedias,” chap. 4 in *Philosophies of Music History: A Study of General Histories of Music, 1600–1960* (New York: Dover, 1962), 62.

editor of four outstanding editions of *Baker's* (1958–92) that established his reputation as one of the most distinguished lexicographers of the twentieth century. Such were valued as sources not just of factual information but also of authoritative critical opinion. That Blom adhered to this tradition of critical biographical music lexicography is evident not only in his assessment of Rachmaninoff in *Grove's*, cited above, but also in his preface to that edition:

I hope it [i.e., the present edition] will be felt not only to be worthy of the eminent name it still bears, but to continue showing the personality of its founder, a personality who, if I may judge by my own experience and feeling, has long been not only admired but loved. Whatever the Dictionary's faults may have been, and may still be, it has always had that personal quality: its users have gone to it as to a living acquaintance, an expert they not only trust, but personally admire.<sup>66</sup>

As the one-man concise encyclopedia has given way increasingly since the mid-twentieth century to the collaborative multi-volume work, “the gain in factual accuracy,” Coover wrote, “has been balanced by the loss of a unique personality”<sup>67</sup>—a trend that some scholars initially mourned. When, for example, Riemann's *Musik-Lexikon* eventually underwent its posthumous transition to a collaborative work (12th ed., 1959–75), Paul Henry Lang lamented—even belittled, with ironic quotation marks—the “severely factual, ‘objective,’” tone of the new edition, noting that Riemann's “likes and dislikes, which he never hesitated to convey to the reader, were an attractive part” of the original work.<sup>68</sup> Duckles likewise found the new edition lacking “an element of personal taste, of bias even, . . . the kind of sparkle that is found in good measure in such works as Scholes's *Oxford Companion* or the new Baker-Slonimsky [i.e.,

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<sup>66</sup> Blom, preface to *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 5th ed., v.

<sup>67</sup> Coover and Franklin, “Dictionaries,” 7:316.

<sup>68</sup> Lang, review of vol. 1 of the *Riemann Musik Lexikon*, 12th ed., *Musical Quarterly* 45 (October 1959): 563–64.

Slonimsky's 1958 edition of *Baker's*].<sup>69</sup> Even at the dawn of the twenty-first century, Stanley Sadie, the general editor of the most recent print edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (2000), could affirm that “intellectual critical and evaluative writing still have a place in music lexicography.”<sup>70</sup>

Music lexicographers also exercise critical judgment in deciding whom to include in their lexicons, even in supposedly comprehensive works. In the same edition of *The New Grove* just mentioned, Sadie supplied a rationale for inclusion based on perceived interest and historical prominence. “Material relevant to scholars and inquirers in [earlier editions],” he wrote, “may be of very much less interest in 2000, and if so it may no longer be included. . . . This particularly affects entries on performers . . . who have left only a modest mark on musical history, . . . [and also those on] composers whose reputations have faded.”<sup>71</sup> The reasonability of such criteria should not obscure the fact that they are criteria nonetheless and thus critical in nature. Other lexicographers have been less discriminating, only to be “corrected” by later editors. According to Slonimsky, Theodore Baker and Hugo Riemann freely included “musicians with whom [they] had been personally and professionally connected,” musicians who were, in Slonimsky's estimation, “perfectly deserving but utterly unknown” and therefore had to be removed.<sup>72</sup> Slonimsky himself devised a (tongue-in-cheek?) mathematical equation of sorts for

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<sup>69</sup> Duckles, review of vol. 1 of the *Riemann Musik Lexikon*, 12th ed., *Notes* 16 (March 1959): 242.

<sup>70</sup> Sadie, preface to the 1980 edition of *The New Grove*, reprinted in 2nd ed., 1:xi. Although the original statement was made in the preface to the 1980 ed., Sadie reaffirmed in the preface to the 2nd ed. (2000) that “the general principles of the compilation and editing of this dictionary are . . . identical, or virtually identical, with those of the 1980 edition, the Preface to which is reprinted below.” Sadie, preface to *The New Grove*, 2nd ed., 1:vii.

<sup>71</sup> Sadie, preface to *The New Grove*, 2nd ed., viii.

<sup>72</sup> Nicolas Slonimsky, preface to the eighth edition of *Baker's*, reprinted in the 2001 ed., 1:lvii.

“lexicographical eligibility” based on the type, importance, quality, number, and popularity of a composer’s works, or on the popularity and “greatness of musical penetration” of a performer.<sup>73</sup>

In more ways than one, then, music lexicography has been broadly conceived as a form of scholarly music criticism, a genre in which the authority of a distinguished commentator merges synergistically with that of the lexicon. This authority is such that, unlike periodical criticism, which can easily be dismissed, discarded, and forgotten, criticism in a music lexicon can be difficult to ignore. Nowhere is this more evident than in the literature on Rachmaninoff. While the composer’s advocates have sharply disagreed with Blom’s harsh assessment in *Grove’s*, sometimes openly disparaging the assessment with such adjectives as “stupid” and “notorious,” they have, nonetheless, felt compelled to cite and rebut it.<sup>74</sup> The assessment has also strongly shaped perceptions of Rachmaninoff’s critical reception, even among those who have disputed its accuracy. Not only, for example, did Schonberg believe that Blom’s commentary represented “a prevalent view of Rachmaninoff and his music” in 1968, but he later mistook the year of Blom’s edition for 1935, mentioning explicitly (but incorrectly) that it appeared during the composer’s lifetime and was typical even then of a tendency among “so-called ‘serious’ critics . . . to underrate him.”<sup>75</sup> In a similar fashion, Glen Carruthers has asserted that the assessment is “typical of critical appraisals from the 1950s and 1960s.”<sup>76</sup> We are thus led to

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<sup>73</sup> Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch: An Autobiography*, new ed., ed. Electra Slonimsky Yourke (New York: Schirmer Trade Books, 2002), 206–07.

<sup>74</sup> Schonberg, “‘Rachmaninoff?’”; Martyn, *Rachmaninoff*, 16. The critical response to Blom’s assessment is discussed in detail on pages 71–72 below.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in John C. Tibbetts, “Remembering Rachmaninoff,” *American Record Guide* 56 (January–February 1993), 6.

<sup>76</sup> Carruthers, “Rachmaninoff, Sergei,” in *Reader’s Guide to Music: History, Theory, and Criticism*, ed. Murray Steib (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1999), 582–83.

believe that a single English assessment from 1954 accurately reflects international critical opinion of Rachmaninoff from the 1930s through the 1960s. To a lesser extent, commentators have also relied on other editions of *Grove's* in drawing general conclusions about the composer's critical reception.<sup>77</sup> Such unguarded reliance on *Grove's* as an infallible barometer of general critical opinion has contributed significantly to the confusion surrounding Rachmaninoff's critical reception that this study aims to elucidate. More to the point, however, the prominent position that *Grove's* has occupied in commentaries on Rachmaninoff's critical reception shows just how far the authority of a distinguished music lexicon can reach.

The importance of music lexicons for a reception study—particularly one situated in the twentieth century, such as this—should now be clear: music lexicons are an abundant, authoritative, and international source of critical opinion. More than any other single genre of musical commentary, they are capable of offering a well-rounded introduction to Rachmaninoff's international critical reception. Whereas periodicals tend toward discussion of an individual event or work, and histories toward evaluation in variously calculated terms of historical importance—in both cases with enormous variety in purpose and scope—lexicons consistently offer critical assessment that is both direct and general. Moreover, they offer a microcosmic view of musical commentary as a whole, since their authors and contributors include not only critics and scholars but also composers and performers. Finally, they are designed to last, and they occupy a prominent place in music bibliography, making them readily accessible to the researcher. Obviously, music lexicons cannot supply a complete picture of reception in musical commentary or in musical life, but they can supply a plausible introductory

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<sup>77</sup> See, for example, Teachout, "What Was the Matter with Rachmaninoff?" 47–48; Gehl, "Reassessing a Legacy," 5–6; Johnston, "Harmony and Climax," 1.

view of international critical reception useful for establishing preliminary conclusions and guiding further inquiry.

Music lexicons also have their idiosyncrasies, which must be acknowledged. As a reviewer once stated, “a trouble with any encyclopedia is that by the time it is published it is already out of date.”<sup>78</sup> This is an unavoidable consequence of the compilation process. Lexicons can never match the immediacy of the periodical—nor are they meant to. Accordingly, they are potentially good indicators of broad shifts in thinking but not of day-to-day ones. Another, related tendency is that music lexicons often feature material retained from previous editions or even borrowed from other lexicons, which is perhaps what Duckles had in mind when he wrote that “dictionaries are among the most tradition-ridden of all publications.”<sup>79</sup> Slonimsky gained firsthand knowledge of lexicographical borrowing when, as a contributor and associate editor of the first edition of Oscar Thompson’s *International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians* (1939), he entered Thompson’s office one morning only to find “a prolixity of young men and women busily copying bits of misinformation from such tainted sources as [Arthur Eaglefield-]Hull’s *Dictionary of Modern Music and Musicians* [1924], the obsolete 1926 edition of *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, and other flawed reference works.”<sup>80</sup> He dubbed such borrowers “Grove-diggers” and “garbage collectors,”<sup>81</sup> and he further bemoaned the practice,

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<sup>78</sup> Anthony Gishford, review of *Grove’s Dictionary of Music*, 5th ed., *Tempo*, n.s., no. 34 (Winter 1954–55): 30.

<sup>79</sup> Duckles, “Some Observations,” 116.

<sup>80</sup> Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch*, 193.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 193–94; Slonimsky, “Lexicographis secundus post Herculem labor,” *Notes* 33 (June 1977): 767–68. Slonimsky referred to the scene in Thompson’s office as being “among the most nightmarish recollections of lexicographic horrors, . . . indelibly etched in the corrugations of my medulla oblongata.” *Ibid.*, 766.

with characteristic wit, in a review of the *Encyclopédie de la musique* published by Fasquelle (1958–61): “What a sense of frustration! As the Fasquelle volumes came off the press in stately succession I pounced eagerly on them, and with bated breath and fevered brow *je feuilletais les pages* hoping to find something not copied from the French Riemann of 1930, and/or Grove of 1954, and/or early volumes of MGG. . . . *Rien, absolument rien!*”<sup>82</sup>

These idiosyncrasies do not disqualify music lexicography as a source of critical opinion. The borrowing that Slonimsky witnessed pertains above all, as his accounts make clear, to the copying of documentary information. Even the very edition of Thompson’s *International Cyclopedia* in question—which earned Slonimsky’s scorn as “a hefty dinosaur egg with a yolk betraying the admixture of protein from many other musicological reptiles”<sup>83</sup>—features a freshly written article on Rachmaninoff. Nor should critical assessments that have been retained or borrowed be regarded ipso facto as outdated or inauthentic, insofar as they have undergone the editorial process contemporaneously; music lexicons are meant to contain information of a more or less permanent nature, and as long as an editor finds an existing critical assessment sufficiently fair and accurate, he or she will have little reason to change it.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> “I leafed through the pages. . . . Nothing, absolutely nothing!” Quotation appended by the editor to Coover’s review of vols. 2 and 3 of *Encyclopédie de la musique*, ed. Michel François, *Notes* 18 (June 1961): 422. Riemann and Grove we have met, but “MGG” here refers to the premiere German music encyclopedia, *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, whose first edition was still being issued serially at the time of Slonimsky’s remark.

<sup>83</sup> Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch*, 193.

<sup>84</sup> In rare cases, an assessment may be retained for reasons other than editorial concurrence, and such do not necessarily possess authority as expressions of contemporaneous critical opinion. Casper Höweler, for example, forbade posthumous changes to his popular *X-Y-Z der muziek*, which continued to be issued in new “editions” for decades after his death. Frits van der Waa, “Snerpende sinustonen,” *De Volkskrant*, February 19, 2004. (This article can be viewed at Van der Waa’s website, accessed May 12, 2016, <https://fvdwaa.home.xs4all.nl/art/vk1480.htm>.)

This study is based on a survey of 226 music lexicons published from 1900 to 2013 in Dutch, English, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Spanish, and Swedish.<sup>85</sup> The assessments gleaned through this survey have been analyzed not merely to tally negative and positive judgments of Rachmaninoff's legacy as a composer but also to determine the critical concepts and rationales that underpin these judgments. Conducting this analysis is relatively straightforward in the case of assessments that offer some self-explanation, more often the longer ones.<sup>86</sup> Lexicons, however, tend toward concision, and it is often desirable or necessary to clarify an assessment by consulting, where possible, its author's other entries or writings. This can only be done when an assessment's authorship is known. Much of the time, assessments are unsigned, and such cannot always be assumed to have been written by a lexicon's editor or compiler, even when a lexicon bears the latter's name. *Baltzell's Dictionary of Musicians* (1911) would appear, for example, to feature the critical opinion of prominent early-twentieth-century American music writer and editor W. J. Baltzell. His prefatory note reveals, however, that he did not claim authorship and was in fact "greatly indebted to Miss Marguerite Barton, . . . who rendered valuable assistance in gathering the material upon which the sketches were based and in preparing the first draft of the manuscript."<sup>87</sup> By contrast, all of the more than one thousand pages of the original, unassumingly titled *Oxford Companion to Music* were authored by Percy Scholes, and his opinion, as Duckles noted above, is evident throughout.

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<sup>85</sup> The translations in this study are my own, save for that of the assessment from the Hungarian *Zenei Lexikon*, in which case I was substantially aided by Bruce V. Chiarelli. To him I offer my sincere gratitude.

<sup>86</sup> An assessment's length is not, it should be mentioned, a reliable measure of its author's regard for its subject. For a brief discussion of this sometimes assumed correlation, see Scholes, preface to the first ed. of *The Oxford Companion to Music*, reprinted in the 9th ed., xii.

<sup>87</sup> Winton J. Baltzell, editor's note to *Baltzell's Dictionary of Musicians*.

Although, as we have seen, it has generally been assumed that Rachmaninoff's music has been criticized primarily from the standpoint of modernism, the latter is, in fact, only one of three distinct ideologies that have influenced his critical reception in varying mixtures. Much has been, and still could be, written about these ideologies—far too much to cover in any detail here—but all that the reader must know of them in order to comprehend this study can easily be summarized. *Classicism* prized contrapuntal and formal mastery in combination with nobility of purpose, and its arch-representative is Beethoven. Music that failed on any of these counts might be deemed superficial, sentimental, or technically inept. Virtuosity was particularly suspect in stricter formulations of this ideology and had lasting repercussions for the reception of Liszt, for example. *Modernism*, by contrast, prized stylistic innovation conceived as the departure from classic norms in an attempt to engage musically with the social, economic, and political circumstances of modern life. Modernism had its roots in the nineteenth century but reached its apex in the mid-twentieth, and Stravinsky is probably its best-known representative. Music that failed to demonstrate stylistic contemporaneity thus conceived was regarded as old-fashioned, academic, superficial, or sentimental, and its composers as epigones. It is safe to say that no major composer has suffered more as a result of this ideology than Rachmaninoff; this popular notion seems justified.

The other ideology is *nationalism*, a well-recognized one that has, nonetheless, passed virtually unnoticed in connection with Rachmaninoff's critical reception. The deconstruction of this concept in its remarkably persistent application to Russian music has been one of Richard Taruskin's principal legacies and was the premise of his seminal *Defining Russia Musically*.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> See Taruskin, "Others: A Mythology and a Demurer (By Way of Preface)," in *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), xi–xxxii; and Taruskin, "Some Thoughts on the History and Historiography of Russia Music,"

Stated simply, according to this ideology, the individuality and authenticity of Russian composers depended on their adherence to preconceived notions of Russianness in music that were strongly colored by racism and colonialism. As Taruskin has written, “whether invoked in praise or in blame, the arbitrarily defined or proclaimed Russianness of Russian music is a normative criterion, and ineluctably an invidious one. If ‘How Russian is it?’ is your critical question, then you have consigned Russian composers to a ghetto.”<sup>89</sup> Ironically, these preconceived notions emanated in part from certain Russian composers and critics themselves—the Five (i.e., Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Musorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov) and their principal critical mouthpiece, Vladimir Stasov—who sought recognition on the basis of national authenticity in opposition to the popular and professional success of Anton Rubinstein and his pupil Tchaikovsky, whom they regarded pejoratively as cosmopolitan. As elsewhere, the most obvious hallmarks of nationalism in Russian music were the incorporation of folk tunes and national subject matter, but Russian nationalists also set themselves in opposition to the conventions of classical forms, identifying musically with the progressive romanticism of Berlioz and Liszt. Because the most overtly nationalistic Russian composers lived and worked in St. Petersburg, these propagated a (false) dichotomy between themselves and composers operating in Moscow. They gained strong critical adherents in the West, especially in France and England, fundamentally impacting the trajectory of the historiography of Russian music up until the end of the twentieth century.

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*Journal of Musicology* 3 (Autumn 1984): 321–39. Taruskin’s perspective is effectively summarized in Francis Maes, “Introduction: Natasha’s Dance, or Musical Nationalism,” chap. 1 of *A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans and Erica Pomerans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 1–10.

<sup>89</sup> Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, xvii.

While these ideologies will be encountered in varying degrees in the assessments in this study, most of the latter neither praise nor dismiss the composer in overtly dogmatic terms; throughout the twentieth century, universal criteria such as technical mastery and distinctness of personality prevailed in critical assessments in music lexicons. Rachmaninoff's music has generally been evaluated favorably in these terms, and this study will argue that, considered collectively over time, music lexicons have served to affirm his legacy as a composer rather than to diminish it. For nearly four decades from his first appearance in the genre, Rachmaninoff elicited not a single negative assessment in any lexicon surveyed, though the few French lexicons published during this period were cooler than others in their treatment of him. A small number of negative assessments appeared during mid-century, first in England, where nationalism was a prominent critical ideology for Russian music, and then spreading into Central Europe and Italy, where a modernistic viewpoint was more apparent, culminating in the 1970s. Since that time, the ideologies of modernism and nationalism have both waned. There has been a steady increase among music lexicons toward a balanced and detailed appreciation of Rachmaninoff's music, with the most recent scholarly works rejoining the many others that never diverged from a basically affirmative assessment of his oeuvre.

## Chapter 1

### 1900–1937: International Recognition

The first distinct period in Rachmaninoff's reception in music lexicons extends from 1900 through 1937. Music lexicons of this period witness his rise to international fame throughout the West, registering his successive achievements as composer and performer. These assessments tend toward brevity, as might be expected, since his career was still in the process of unfolding. None of them are negative, while those in several of the most prominent music lexicons are unambiguously favorable. Rachmaninoff regularly elicited mention as a composer and pianist, sometimes also as a conductor.

By the end of the first decade of the century, Rachmaninoff had appeared in Baker's *Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, Riemann's *Musik-Lexikon*, and Grove's *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, which at that time were the three most important lexicographical sources of current musical biography.<sup>1</sup> The first music lexicon anywhere to feature Rachmaninoff was the inaugural edition of Baker's *Biographical Dictionary*, which appeared in 1900. The brief entry features only the barest facts of his birth, education, and budding oeuvre, noting that he had won the Moscow Conservatory's "great gold medal" on graduating from that institution. Unlike most later lexicon entries, this one does not mention the Prelude in C-sharp Minor specifically, which serves as a reminder that the composer's early reputation was not entirely dependent on the popular success of that one work. Baker's *Biographical Dictionary* proved from the beginning to be the outstanding source of accurate biographical information that it was designed

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<sup>1</sup> Though published from 1900 to 1904, Eitner's monumental *Biographisch-bibliographisches Quellen-Lexikon der Musiker und Musikgelehrten der christlichen Zeitrechnung bis zur Mitte des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* extends only up to the mid-nineteenth century, as its title indicates, and does not, of course, feature Rachmaninoff.

to be, and it evidently proved useful not only for lay readers but also for other lexicographers: its pioneering entry on Rachmaninoff is clearly the same one that appears, discreetly modified, in Rupert Hughes's *Music Lovers' Encyclopedia*, the first edition of which came out in 1903.<sup>2</sup>

Rachmaninoff subsequently appeared in three editions of the Riemann, only the last of which was one of Riemann's own German editions. Riemann was perhaps the most distinguished German music theorist and historian of his generation, and, as noted in the introduction, his *Musik-Lexikon* was not only circulated widely in German but was also translated, in its various editions, into many other languages. In 1904, Rachmaninoff appeared in Iulii Engel's Russian translation, described as an "excellent pianist and gifted composer" (otlichnyi pianist i darovityi kompozitor), and he also appears, without critical commentary, in the 1908 edition of John Shedlock's English translation.<sup>3</sup> Riemann himself included the composer for the first time only in the seventh edition of his *Musik-Lexikon*, in 1909, where he notes that "Rachmaninoff . . . made himself known first as an excellent pianist but soon drew attention as a composer as well,"<sup>4</sup> describing him further as a "promising talent" (vielversprechendes Talent).

A letter that Rachmaninoff wrote to Engel' in late 1899 offers an informative glimpse into the process of biographical lexicography. Engel' had, evidently, written to the composer, requesting some biographical information about him for inclusion in his forthcoming edition of

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<sup>2</sup> This work was issued simultaneously as *The Musical Guide*. Subsequent editions retain the title named in the body text, save for the 2nd edition (1912), which bore the title *Musical Lovers' Cyclopedia* and features the same borrowed article on Rachmaninoff from 1903.

<sup>3</sup> Two later concise music lexicons compiled by Engel' also contain entries for Rachmaninoff, without descriptive commentary, the *Kratkii muzykal'nyi slovar'* [Concise music dictionary] (1910) and the *Karmannyi muzykal'nyi slovar'* [Pocket music dictionary] (1913). Engel's name is often transliterated as "Joel Engel."

<sup>4</sup> "Rachmaninow . . . machte sich zuerst als ausgezeichneter Klavierspieler bekannt, zog aber bald auch als Komponist die Aufmerksamkeit auf sich."

the Riemann. In response, Rachmaninoff sent him a transcript of a biographical sketch of himself that had been published in a London periodical earlier that year in connection with his first appearance in the city, explaining that he had nothing more detailed to offer but that he was willing to furnish Engel' with additional information personally should it be desired.<sup>5</sup>

Rachmaninoff's language suggests that Engel' had specifically requested published materials, which reveals something of the relationship between the journalistic press and lexicography, namely that the former tends to precede the latter. This exchange also shows that the old practice of soliciting biographical information from one's own subject, first employed by Mattheson in the early-eighteenth century,<sup>6</sup> still retained its appeal for biographical lexicographers at the end of the nineteenth. But who supplied the information for Rachmaninoff's biographical sketch to begin with? The answer, given in the sketch itself, reveals still more about the sources of biographical music lexicography: "We are indebted," it reads, "for the details of his [i.e., Rachmaninoff's] life to Herr Gustav Ernst, to whom they were in a great measure personally communicated by Rachmaninoff."<sup>7</sup> Rachmaninoff, it seems, was given the chance of helping to shape his own public image in more than one form of musical commentary, which may explain

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<sup>5</sup> Rachmaninoff to Engel', October 27 (OS), 1899, in *S. Rakhmaninov: Literaturnoe nasledie* [S. Rachmaninoff: The literary legacy], ed. Zarui Apetian (Moscow: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1978–80), 1:291–92. See also Apetian's endnote for this letter, 1:549–50, where she names the periodical and reproduces the (presumably original) Russian text of Rachmaninoff's typewritten transcript of the sketch. The concise work list appended to this transcript, however, does not appear in the original article. Rachmaninoff probably added it to the transcript for Engel's reference.

<sup>6</sup> Coover and Franklin, "Dictionaries," 7:311. See also Lennenberg, "Toward a Composite Portrait of the Eighteenth-century Musician," chap. 4 of *Witnesses and Scholars*, 46–65.

<sup>7</sup> [Untitled article], *Black and White*, April 22, 1899, 481. Gustav Ernst was a professor at the Crystal Palace School of Art, Science, and Literature and had offered a series of lecture-recitals on contemporary Russian music in early 1899, including one on Rachmaninoff's *Trio élégiaque* in D Minor, op. 9. "Colleges, Schools, etc.," *London Standard*, February 22, 1899, 1; [Untitled article], *Black and White*, March 11, 1899, 313.

why the sketch emphasizes his greatest successes up to that point—the conservatory medal, the fact that it had been awarded only once previously, and the success in Russian theaters of his first opera, *Aleko*—without mentioning the now famous and then recent public failure of his First Symphony at its premiere in 1897.

Rachmaninoff appeared in *Grove's* for the first time in the second edition, in 1908, in an entry whose biographical outline closely resembles the one in Engel's Riemann. It is one of many entries on Russian composers in that edition written by Rosa Newmarch, who through continuing correspondence and travel to Russia had become an important Western source of information on the music of that country. Newmarch's articles reveal her awareness of the nationalistic musical discourse of the time, but her personal taste was not limited by it, for she was an important early proponent of Tchaikovsky.<sup>8</sup> She describes Rachmaninoff as “a pianist of repute, and one of the most talented of the younger Moscow school of composers,” noting that he had “made a good impression in the threefold capacity of composer, conductor, and pianist” at his London debut in 1899.

The next decade opened with Rachmaninoff's inclusion in *The Standard Musical Encyclopedia* of 1910 and *Baltzell's Dictionary of Musicians* of 1911, the latter of which notes the “novel and varied harmonic effects [of his piano music], well worth the effort of overcoming the considerable technical difficulty.” A longer assessment appeared in 1919, in the third edition of *Baker's*, newly written by Alfred Remy, the editor of that edition.<sup>9</sup> A German-born New

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<sup>8</sup> See Newmarch, *Tchaikovsky: His Life and Works* (London: Richards, 1900); and Modest Tchaikovsky, *The Life and Letters of Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky*, trans. Newmarch (London: J. Lane, 1906).

<sup>9</sup> Although the assessment bears no signature, Remy's authorship may be presumed from attributions on the title page and in the preface, as well as from the consistency in taste evident in various entries.

Yorker and direct contemporary of Rachmaninoff, Remy was a linguist and educator by profession but held arts degrees and was active as a program annotator, music critic for *Vogue*, occasional lecturer, and head of the music division of the *New International Encyclopedia*.<sup>10</sup> His glowing assessment praises Rachmaninoff's music not only for its melodic richness but also for its technical mastery, nobility, and individuality, the last in a manner that little concerns stylistic innovation as conceived in much later twentieth-century criticism. Remy appears to have considered Rachmaninoff to be potentially one of the world's greatest contemporary composers, and he did not, by contrast with later commentators, view his excellence as a pianist as a liability:

Excellent pianist and gifted composer. . . . Among living Russian composers Rachmaninoff unquestionably occupies the first place because of his pronounced inventive power and finely developed sense of tonal beauty. He keeps aloof from both impressionism and futurism. The stirring effect of his music proceeds from the inherent beauty and expressiveness of his themes and their logical, masterly development. Technically he has learned from the modern Russian and German masters, but his remarkable inventive power and rich imagination impress upon his work the stamp of unmistakable individuality. Although a master of all moods, he excels in the portrayal of the heroic. Nobility, directness, fire, and strength are the prominent characteristics of his music.

As an expression of high praise for the composer in one of the world's leading biographical music lexicons, Remy's article contrasts starkly with the dismissive statements about the composer in authoritative contexts that this dissertation took as its point of departure. What distinguishes his assessment from those statements, however, seems to be not so much the nature of the music under consideration as the predilections of the given commentator. Remy's admiration for Rachmaninoff can be understood as a reflection of his ardent admiration of Wagner, whose late-romantic style Rachmaninoff shared in significant respects. Remy offered a

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<sup>10</sup> "Alfred Remy: Language Teacher and Musician Succumbs Here at 66," *New York Times*, March 1, 1937; "Prof. Alfred Remy's Funeral Held Today," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 1, 1937.

series of lectures on Wagner for Columbia University's Institute of Arts and Sciences during the winter of 1914–15<sup>11</sup> and infused Baker's article on Wagner from the second edition with even more enthusiasm in the present edition: "In comprehensiveness and grandeur of conception, originality and boldness of execution, vividness of characterization, intensity of expression and sustained power Wagner towers like a colossus above all other dramatic composers."<sup>12</sup>

Given his romantic predilection, it is perhaps not surprising that Remy responded poorly to what he (and many others at that time) termed "futurism" or the "ultra-modern."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, his relatively indiscriminate use of such stylistic terms suggests that Remy held little sympathy for the progressive music of his time. He felt that, after *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Debussy's style exhibits "a decline, for the music seems to become even more intangible," proof enough for Remy of the meager aesthetic possibilities of impressionism. Remy praised Richard Strauss's symphonic poems up to 1895 for their "emotional intensity, soaring melodic invention, a marvelous sense of orchestral color, extraordinary power of characterization and supreme command of technical resources," but later ones such as *Don Quixote* and *Ein Heldenleben* initiated a "steady decline" culminating with the opera *Elektra*, in which he reached "the lowest level of decadence." Nowhere is his antipathy for "futurism" on better display than in his commentary on Stravinsky:

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<sup>11</sup> "Discuss Wagner Music: Mr. Alfred Remy Lectures Before the Institute," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, February 26, 1915; "To Lecture on Wagner," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, March 10, 1915."

<sup>12</sup> For this and the following quotations from Remy, see, in order of their appearance here, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, 3rd ed., s.vv. "Wagner, (Wilhelm) Richard"; "Debussy, Claude (-Achille)"; "Strauss, Richard"; and "Stravinsky, Igor Fedorovitch."

<sup>13</sup> Remy is also reported to have "termed both Weimar art and music aberrations." Guy Stern, "The Way We Were: Reminiscences of Columbia's German Department," *Germanic Review* 78 (Winter 2003): 14.

Unlike Schönberg or Scriabin, whose earliest music still rests on the foundation laid by the masters, Stravinsky at once begins in a style which is a direct negation of all acknowledged principles or standards. His combinations of tones defy analysis, for haphazard combinations of dissonant intervals do not constitute a chord, as that term is understood in music. The complete absence of even the most meager thematic developments may surprise only those who do not know that the first law of futurism forbids all “repetition.”

Remy’s assessment of Rachmaninoff thus becomes unequivocal. Keeping “aloof from both impressionism and futurism” meant avoiding those two strains of modern music that Remy found most objectionable, while Rachmaninoff’s kinship with Wagnerian late romanticism won him Remy’s praise.

Positive impressions of Rachmaninoff’s music appear also in publications of the 1920s. The 1924 *New Encyclopedia of Music and Musicians* reports that Rachmaninoff’s “renown rests both upon his gifts in interpretation and impression at the keyboard and upon the originality and nobility of his compositions.” The shorter assessments in Ralph Dunstan’s *Cyclopaedic Dictionary of Music* and Carlo Schmidl’s *Dizionario universale dei musicisti* are in a similar vein. Similar to Remy’s in length and enthusiasm was Granville Bantock’s assessment, also appearing in 1924, in *A Dictionary of Modern Music and Musicians*, a significant work featuring a global list of distinguished contributors. Bantock is not widely known, but he was one of the most prominent English composers of his generation, succeeding Elgar at Birmingham University in 1908 and remaining there until 1934. Bantock, like Remy, appealed to traditional, rather than progressive, criteria in his evaluation of Rachmaninoff’s music, which he praises for its idiomatic instrumentation, national color, and individuality:

His three pianoforte concertos . . . are welcome additions to the repertory of concert pianists, being grateful to the soloist, and very effectively scored for orchestra. His style is essentially melodious, and he makes frequent use of the national idioms in his music. His music, classical in spirit and in technique, reveals a clearly defined and attractive personality. As a song-writer, Rachmaninoff is in the front rank of Russian composers and his songs cover a wide and varied range of expression.

The musical inclinations behind Bantock's critical approach are not far to seek. He composed on a large scale, sharing as a creator of music the predilection for the German late-romantic aesthetic that Remy displayed as a writer.<sup>14</sup> He was an important early advocate of Sibelius in England and, like Rachmaninoff himself, maintained an admiration for Tchaikovsky that left its imprint on his music.<sup>15</sup> It is unclear, however, what Bantock meant by "national idioms." Perhaps he regarded Tchaikovsky's style as national and hence regarded Rachmaninoff's as such on account of its similarity with the former.

Bantock's assessment subsequently became the subject of a remarkable series of borrowings, making it influential to a degree that would have been difficult to predict. Alfred Einstein, one of the eminent musicologists of his time and a significant contributor to *A Dictionary of Modern Music and Musicians*, borrowed Bantock's stylistic commentary for his edited German translation of that work, *Das neue Musiklexikon: nach dem Dictionary of Modern Music and Musicians*, which appeared in 1926. There he paired Bantock's commentary with biographical information taken from Riemann's *Musik-Lexikon*, the editorship of which he had assumed on its author's death in 1919. In this form, Einstein's composite assessment enjoyed considerable prominence. Einstein carried it into the eleventh edition of the Riemann, published in 1929, where it commanded considerable attention and was not superseded for more than thirty

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<sup>14</sup> For a contemporaneous survey of Bantock's works, see Herbert Antcliffe, "A Brief Survey of the Works of Granville Bantock," *Musical Quarterly* 4 (July 1918): 333–46; for a retrospective view, see Peter J. Pirie, "Bantock and His Generation," *Musical Times* 109 (August 1968): 715–17.

<sup>15</sup> Regarding Bantock and Tchaikovsky, see Michael Allis, "Bantock and Southey: Musical Otherness and Fatalism in *Thalaba the Destroyer*," *Music and Letters* 95 (2014): 50–54.

years.<sup>16</sup> This edition was cited by the 1932 Dutch *Geïllustreerd muzieklexicon* and also served as the basis for the 1954 *Diccionario de la música Labor*,<sup>17</sup> both of which feature Einstein's entry on Rachmaninoff in slightly adapted form. But even before the assessment appeared in the Riemann, its influence was felt from *Das neue Musiklexikon*, for it left an unmistakable imprint on the assessment that appeared, also in 1929, in the *Diccionario de la música ilustrado*. From there it was carried in turn, in 1952, into the *Diccionario enciclopédico de la música*.

This situation merits some reflection. First, as suggested in the introduction, music lexicographers can be tenacious borrowers, undaunted by lingual barriers (overcoming these is rather the point) and unconcerned by the potential irrelevance to their own readership of an assessment written in a different place, time, or both. Such is the authority of the lexicon: lexicographers, like their readers, turn to lexicons when they need information deemed too difficult to obtain through independent effort. They borrow because they believe that lexicons contain only factual information. Even so distinguished a musical commentator as Einstein—critic, musicologist, editor of the Riemann and the *Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft*—was not opposed to borrowing when confronted by the practical limits of his knowledge. Second, Rachmaninoff was considered important enough that even lexicographers who, judging from the directness of their borrowing from another source, lacked personal familiarity with his music still felt it necessary to include him. Far from invalidating these assessments, this circumstance suggests that Rachmaninoff was generally held in high regard. In any event, from the mid-1920s

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<sup>16</sup> Einstein likewise carried much else from *Das neue Musiklexikon* into this edition. Duckles and Reed, *Music Reference and Research Materials*, 6. The 12th ed. of the Riemann began appearing in 1959 and will be examined below.

<sup>17</sup> Duckles and Reed, *Music Reference and Research Materials*, 11.

to the mid-1950s, Bantock's enthusiastic description of the composer reached what can only be a very large number of English, Dutch, German, and Spanish readers.

Assessments of the 1930s attest to Rachmaninoff's continuing prominence in musical life. The enthusiastic assessment that appeared in 1931 in the Hungarian *Zenei Lexikon* (Music dictionary)—likely written by Rachmaninoff's earlier biographer Oskar von Riesemann, the lexicon's listed contributor for Russian music—notes of the composer that, “since the [18]90s, he has caused a worldwide sensation with the suggestive power and tremendous dramatic fantasy of his brilliant piano playing and later with his classically oriented but essentially late-romantic piano compositions, which have stood out from the body of recent Russian music mainly by virtue of their brilliant exploitation of the piano's tonal palette.”<sup>18</sup> The assessment that appeared in 1935 in the first edition of Hans Moser's *Musik Lexikon* offers, like Einstein's, a brief stylistic comment<sup>19</sup> but seems not to be grounded in personal familiarity with the music, suggested in this case by editorial error. He notes that Rachmaninoff's “cantata *The Bells* . . . attracted attention, as did a second symphony (A Minor [*sic*]) and his recent variations on Corelli's *Folia* for piano and orchestra [*sic*]”—incorrectly indicating the key of the Second Symphony (E minor) and the instrumentation of the *Corelli Variations* (for piano solo).<sup>20</sup> It was the fact that such works

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<sup>18</sup> “A 90-es évek óta világszerte feltűnést keltett szuggesztív erejű, hatalmas drámai fantáziától fűtött, szinpompás zongorajátékával, majd klasszicisztikus irányú, de szellemükben későromantikus zongora kompozícióival, melyek főként a zongoraszinhatások bravuros kiaknázásában magaslanak ki az újabb orosz zeneirodalomból.”

<sup>19</sup> “As a successful song and piano composer, Rachmaninoff is more closely associated with Tchaikovsky than Musorgsky.” (Rachmaninow knüpfte als erfolgreich Lieder- und Klavier-Komponist mehr bei Tschaikowski als bei Mussorgski an.)

<sup>20</sup> “Seine Kantate *Glocken* . . . wurde ebenso beachtet wie eine 2. Sinfonie (a-moll) und neuestens seine Variationen über Corellis *Folia* für Klavier und Orchester.” It was the symphony's key, not its number, that Moser mistook, for Rachmaninoff's Third Symphony, which *is* in A minor, was not completed until 1936.

“attracted attention” that seems to have been most relevant or important. Rachmaninoff’s prominence was likewise the principle for his inclusion in the 1936 edition of Paul Frank’s *Kurzgefaßtes Tonkünstler-Lexikon* and underlies his assessment in the 1937 *Encyclopedia of Music and Musicians*.

To summarize, the most prominent music lexicons of England, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Russia, Spain, and the United States all featured favorable assessments of Rachmaninoff during this period. No assessments from this period describe Rachmaninoff as old-fashioned or shallow. Quite the opposite. Though Remy’s and Bantock’s stylistic commentaries were longer than average, their tone is characteristic: Rachmaninoff was viewed as a distinguished, multifaceted, distinctly Russian composer with a growing list of visible musical achievements. The only noteworthy exception to this trend is France, where lexicographical opinion was decidedly neutral. Rachmaninoff first appeared in George Humbert’s French translation of the Riemann in 1913, in the second edition, which reproduces Riemann’s original entry from the seventh German edition while omitting the phrase “promising talent.” The entry in third French edition, which appeared in 1931, is updated but offers no additional evaluative comment. Even in France, however, Rachmaninoff’s prominence was acknowledged. The article on Russian music in Albert Lavignac’s important *Encyclopédie de la musique et dictionnaire du conservatoire* names him with Arensky, Glazunov, and Scriabin as “the most passionate and important representatives” of “the Wagnerian tendency” in contemporaneous Russian music.<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that music lexicography was a relatively unimportant channel for critical opinion in France during this period. Aside from the three

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<sup>21</sup> “La tendance qui se manifeste aujourd’hui le plus généralement est la tendance wagnérienne. Arenski, . . . Glazounoff, . . . Rachmaninoff et Scriabine en sont les représentants les plus passionnés et les plus importants.” René Delange and Henry Malherbe, “Russie,” in *Encyclopédie de la musique et dictionnaire du conservatoire*, 5:2565.

editions of Humbert's translated Riemann and Lavignac's *Encyclopédie*, the only noteworthy music lexicon to appear in France was Michel Brenet's terminological *Dictionnaire pratique et historique de la musique*.

## Chapter 2

### 1938–1979: Regional Variation

Assessments from the late 1930s mark a shift in Rachmaninoff's reception in music lexicons. On one hand, in 1938, the first negative assessment of the composer in a music lexicon appeared, in the first edition of Percy Scholes's *Oxford Companion to Music*, initiating a clash of opinions in the genre concerning Rachmaninoff's legacy that would characterize the entire period lasting until around 1980. On the other, in 1939, Rachmaninoff received favorable treatment in a new entry longer than any yet written on him, in the first edition of Oscar Thompson's *International Cyclopaedia of Music and Musicians*, which prefigured a general trend toward more detailed coverage of the composer's life and works in music lexicons of the period. Assessments published at this time also exhibit greater ideological diversity than before. Universal criteria continued to be employed but were now inflected, in some cases, by modernism or nationalism, sometimes overtly. In America, Eastern Europe, and Italy, assessments initially gained in enthusiasm, while appreciation in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden was more tempered. In England, lexicographical opinion became sharply divided. Although some English lexicons of the period continued to espouse a favorable view of the composer, Scholes proved only the first of three influential English commentators to write negative assessments of Rachmaninoff in high-profile music lexicons during mid-century, each of them evincing a critical outlook strongly colored by nationalism. These prefigured a broader downturn in Rachmaninoff's reception in the genre on the European Continent, where modernism was the more prominent ideology.

### Growing Enthusiasm: America, Eastern Europe, and Italy

In the United States especially, assessments grew longer and more detailed. Rounding out the 1930s were two longer assessments that essentially expanded upon the international consensus established up to this point.<sup>1</sup> The first of these was mentioned above and appeared in 1939 in the first edition of Thompson's *International Cyclopedia*. Written by Irving Kolodin, the new entry would appear unchanged in each of the title's ten subsequent editions, the last appearing in 1985, and it was also reprinted in Thompson's *Great Modern Composers* in 1941. Kolodin was then writing for the *New York Sun* and would go on to become one of the most widely read American critics of the mid-twentieth century, distinguished as a program annotator for the New York Philharmonic, reviewer of recordings, and author of several books.<sup>2</sup> The biographical portion of his article on Rachmaninoff is the longest yet offered in a music lexicon and clearly benefited from Oskar von Riesemann's 1934 biography of the composer.<sup>3</sup> Assessing his oeuvre, Kolodin acknowledged the popularity of Rachmaninoff's piano works but more especially praised the songs and the symphonic and piano-symphonic works. His description of the Second Symphony encapsulates his general regard for the composer at his best: "Allied to the late works of Tchaikovsky in spirit and expression, it nevertheless speaks a vocabulary warmly individual and strongly distinctive, flavored by accents not to be confused with those of any other composer."

Kolodin also offered particular praise for Rachmaninoff's orchestration: "Within its

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<sup>1</sup> There is a third American assessment from this period, the one in Albert Wier's *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Music and Musicians* (1938), which does not contain critical commentary.

<sup>2</sup> See Kolodin, *The Composer as Listener: A Guide to Music* (New York: Horizon, 1958); Kolodin, *The Metropolitan Opera: 1883–1966*, 4th ed. (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1966); Kolodin, *The Musical Life* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1958).

<sup>3</sup> See Oskar von Riesemann, *Rachmaninoff's Recollections: Told to Oskar von Riesemann* (1934; reprint, Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970).

acknowledged boundaries,” he wrote, “it is writing of surpassing euphony and richness, not only intimately understanding of the nature of the instruments employed, but also—and this is the test of any orchestration—wholly related to the sense of the musical ideas. By this standard, Rachmaninoff’s orchestration is among the soundest that the day’s music can offer.”

Unlike that of Remy and Bantock, Kolodin’s appreciation of Rachmaninoff cannot be attributed to a predominantly romanticist predisposition, as his 1969 book *The Continuity of Music* attests. Kolodin’s taste had its limits, to be sure: a prominent subsidiary goal of the book is to blame Schoenbergian serialism for driving contemporary audiences and composers apart by interrupting “the long sequence of continuity which prevailed over centuries” in European music (that is, a system of melodic and harmonic hierarchies).<sup>4</sup> Kolodin’s primary objective is, however, to foster an appreciation of a wide variety of music by tracing a continuous evolution of musical style among celebrated works from the high Baroque to the mid-twentieth century. Accordingly, Kolodin’s fondness for this varied repertoire is displayed throughout, including eighteenth-century works as well as those by such moderns as Debussy, Stravinsky, and even, to a certain extent, the members of the Second Viennese School. His basic concern was that music satisfy the interests of “a large segment of the discriminating public”<sup>5</sup>—which, as anyone would agree, Rachmaninoff’s music does.

The other American assessment also appeared in 1939, in a revised edition of the *Music Lovers’ Encyclopedia*, and was written by Richard Leonard.<sup>6</sup> Leonard was a radio programmer

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<sup>4</sup> Kolodin, *The Continuity of Music: A History of Influence* (New York: Knopf, 1969), vi–vii, 4–7, 356–66.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, vi.

<sup>6</sup> This lexicon consists of two major parts: a “Biographical Dictionary of Musicians”—which consists of concise entries and was published separately in 1940 as *The Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*—and “Short Biographies of Musicians,” which contains articles running a few

for the National Broadcasting Company and the author of the popular mid-century *A History of Russian Music*.<sup>7</sup> His commentary opens with a description of Rachmaninoff's conservative position vis-à-vis the musical developments of his day—the first mention of this issue that we have yet encountered in music lexicons—noting that “much of Rachmaninoff's music sounds like a voice from the past, speaking the romantic speech of the eighteen-eighties and nineties.” But whereas Rachmaninoff's detractors have tended to interpret this circumstance as a symptom of epigonism, Leonard attributes it to Rachmaninoff's “proudly individualistic” nature, describing the composer as “a man of forceful inner convictions that could not easily be shaken.” More sharply contrasting views can hardly be imagined. Leonard proceeds with comment on Rachmaninoff's position among Russian composers. Like Newmarch, he displays an awareness of the two late-nineteenth-century schools of Russian music but is not bound by a strict nationalistic view of musical Russianness: “Rachmaninoff is often spoken of as a kind of connecting link between the two main branches of Russian music in the nineteenth century,” Leonard wrote. “. . . He possesses the technical equipment of an eclectic, a thorough knowledge of the methods and procedures of the French and German schools of the nineteenth century; but his thematic material, the whole color and feeling of his music, is unmistakably Russian.” Commenting more specifically on the music itself, Leonard writes that the piano works “lack the depth and subtlety of Chopin's greater works, but they are brilliantly pianistic and exemplify the composer's mastery of the technical resources of the instrument.” By contrast, his praise of the songs and symphonic works is offered without reservation, the last of which are said to “give evidence of the composer's masterful command of the orchestra, and his ability to sustain, in the

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pages in length on prominent composers. Leonard's article on Rachmaninoff appears in the latter, but the former also features a concise, unsigned entry on the composer.

<sup>7</sup> See Richard A. Leonard, *A History of Russian Music* (London: Jarrolds, 1956).

difficult large forms, a lofty inspiration.” In summary, Leonard, like Kolodin, held a balanced view of Rachmaninoff’s oeuvre, not exhibiting any of the partisanship for or against the composer that later came to be thought of as characteristic of his critical reception.

Rachmaninoff continued to garner balanced but essentially favorable treatment in music lexicons published in the United States throughout this period. Subsequent editions of *Music Lovers’ Encyclopedia* appearing in 1947, 1950, and 1954 reproduce Leonard’s earlier commentary. The editors of the fourth edition of *Baker’s*, published in 1940, tempered Remy’s enthusiasm but slightly: Rachmaninoff now occupied “a high place,” rather than “the first,” among living Russian composers, while all of Remy’s other descriptive praise remained unchanged. David Ewen, a versatile, prolific, and respected writer on music, wrote warmly of Rachmaninoff in several of his surveys during this period. His 1959 *Encyclopedia of Concert Music* displays his well-rounded appreciation of the whole range of twentieth-century musical developments (as do his many other writings), which did not prevent him from deeming Rachmaninoff “one of the preeminent musicians of the twentieth century, both as a musical creator and as an interpreter.” Ewen notes, not disparagingly, that Rachmaninoff “was a conservative” for whom “the structures and techniques of the past were completely serviceable. If he did not discover any new worlds of sound,” Ewen continued, “he did succeed in bringing to the old world of music a wealth of beauty, sentiment, nostalgia, and at times melancholy.” Like Leonard, Ewen maintained a flexible view of the national character of Rachmaninoff’s music, deeming it “Russian to its very core . . . not because he aspired towards a nationalist expression or used folk idioms, but because he was a Russian, and everything he wrote was colored by his

own background and temperament.”<sup>8</sup> Ewen described Rachmaninoff similarly in his 1969 *Composers Since 1900* and again in his 1978 *Musicians since 1900*.<sup>9</sup>

Rachmaninoff also received favorable treatment in the most prominent American biographical music lexicon of the period, Slonimsky’s significantly enlarged and completely revised fifth edition of *Baker’s*, which appeared in 1958. A Russian-born American composer, conductor, and musicologist of wide-ranging interests, Slonimsky was among the most celebrated music lexicographers of the twentieth century, valued for his colorful style, erudition, attention to detail, and tireless devotion to accuracy, the product of rigorous and continuous independent research. He had assisted with *The International Cyclopedia* from its inauguration, later editing four successive editions of that title, was heartily acknowledged by Blom for his assistance with the fifth edition of *Grove’s*, was acknowledged also for his help with the twelfth edition of the *Riemann*, and edited four editions of *Baker’s* famous for their accuracy.<sup>10</sup> Like those of Leonard and Ewen, his assessment in *Baker’s* notes Rachmaninoff’s ties with the past but emphasizes his individuality all the same:

Among Russian composers Rachmaninoff occupies a very important place. The sources of his inspiration lie in the romantic tradition of nineteenth-century Russian music; the link with Tchaikovsky’s lyrical art is very strong; melancholy moods prevail and minor keys predominate in Rachmaninoff’s compositions, as in Tchaikovsky’s; but there is an unmistakable stamp of Rachmaninoff’s own individuality in the broad, rhapsodic sweep of the melodic line, and particularly in the fully expanded sonorities and fine resonant harmonies of his piano writing; its technical resourcefulness is unexcelled since Liszt.

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<sup>8</sup> Here Ewen paraphrases a statement made by Rachmaninoff in an extended interview he conducted with the composer for *Etude* magazine. See Rachmaninoff, “Music Should Speak from the Heart,” *Etude*, December 1941, 848.

<sup>9</sup> Ewen described him in the latter as “one of the great composers of the twentieth century.”

<sup>10</sup> Slonimsky recounted the emphatic endorsements of his colleagues “with some measure of pride” in the preface to the eighth edition of *Baker’s*. See also Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch*, 201, 204.

This commentary would appear unchanged in each of the lexicon's four subsequent editions and in the several other titles derived from it.

Aside from its appearance in such an authoritative lexicon, Slonimsky's positive assessment gains in significance when viewed against the backdrop of his well-known advocacy of modern music. Until 1937, when the publication of his unique musical chronicle, *Music since 1900*, made his name as a writer, Slonimsky was best known as a conductor of ultra-modern music. He was the proud dedicatee of Edgard Varèse's *Ionisation* and premiered both that work and Charles Ives's *Three Places in New England*, among others. In fact, his unrelenting advocacy of such music was, according to his own account, what led to the "inglorious end of [his] conducting career," when, in 1933, his summer appointment at the Hollywood Bowl was abruptly terminated by the board mid-season after a series of programs featuring works by Henry Cowell, Roy Harris, Dane Rudhyar, and Varèse.<sup>11</sup>

Slonimsky's interest in modern music did not abate when he settled into his career as a writer—it supplied, for example, the premise of his immensely popular *Lexicon of Musical Invective*—but it never manifested itself in a doctrinaire opposition to late-romantic music as it did with Stravinsky and many others at the time. His *Music since 1900* chronicles the landmark events of Rachmaninoff's career right alongside those of Bartók, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky, in

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<sup>11</sup> Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch*, 124–27. The critical and popular response to these concerts—some of which Slonimsky recounts, along with commentary from the orchestra and its management—makes for amusing reading. See, for example, Isabel Morse Jones, "Bowl Concert Features Queen Mario's Singing," *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 1933; Philip K. Scheuer, "A Town Called Hollywood," *Los Angeles Times*, July 30, 1933; and Alma Whitaker, "Sugar and Spice," *Los Angeles Times*, July 30, 1933. Indeed, Slonimsky's name mysteriously disappears from the *Los Angeles Times* that summer after this press. At least one audience member, however, apparently listened to Slonimsky's programs with interest: John Cage. Slonimsky, "Return to the Hollywood Bowl—58 Years Later," transcript of a lecture given at the Hollywood Bowl on April 15, 1991, in appendix to *Exiles in Paradise*, ed. Carol Merrill-Mirsky (Hollywood: Los Angeles Philharmonic Association, 1991 [exhibition catalog]), 85.

addition to cataloging important modernist documents and Slonimsky's own correspondence with modernist composers. Registering Rachmaninoff's death in the 1949 edition of that title, he described the composer as "the towering giant of the golden age of Russian music, whose emotional concertos and preludes are the perennials of pianism around the globe."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, his 1958 edition of *Baker's* could accommodate both his positive assessment of Rachmaninoff and a statement describing Schoenberg's "music of great expressiveness and power, which, in spite of the difficulties of performance and slowness of public comprehension, has become one of the strongest influences in the art."<sup>13</sup> Rachmaninoff's treatment in other American lexicons of this period is similarly benign.<sup>14</sup>

Though no country produced as many extended assessments during this period as the United States, many European lexicons maintained a comparable view. We have already seen that the two most prominent Spanish lexicons of the period reiterated Bantock's assessment. Russian lexicographical opinion of Rachmaninoff likewise remained high. Russian music lexicons containing composer biographies have not been great in number. After Engel's early Riemann, the next significant work to appear was the 1959 *Entsiklopedicheskii muzykal'nyi*

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<sup>12</sup> Slonimsky, *Music since 1900*, 3rd. ed (New York: Coleman-Ross, 1949), 532. Slonimsky revised this statement slightly for subsequent editions as follows: "Last giant of the golden age of Russian music, great virtuoso pianist, composer of emotionally stirring, supremely pianistic concertos and preludes imperishable in their romantic appeal to successive generations of music lovers all over the world." 4th ed. (1971), 768; 5th ed. (1994), 484.

<sup>13</sup> *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, 5th ed., s.v. "Schoenberg, Arnold."

<sup>14</sup> The most concise of these abstain from critical commentary, while others feature favorable commentary. See Christine Ammer, *Harper's Dictionary of Music* (1972); *The ASCAP Biographical Dictionary* (1966; this brief assessment was carried into the 1980 ed.); Norman Lloyd, *The Golden Encyclopedia of Music* (1968); Kenneth Thompson's *Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Composers* (1973), which abstains from assessment generally but features an informed biographical summary of Rachmaninoff, a meticulous work list, and a generous bibliography; and Watson and Watson, *A Concise Dictionary of Music* (1965).

*slovar'* (Encyclopedic music dictionary), which features a brief but laudatory article describing Rachmaninoff as a master Russian composer in multiple genres with a wide emotional range.

The assessment was polished up for the second edition, published in 1966, as follows:

One of the greatest representatives of the pianistic art in the world, an excellent conductor, and an outstanding master of piano, symphonic, and vocal music. Romantic pathos and masculine power combine in Rachmaninoff's music with lyrical and contemplative moods. It is characterized by expansive lyricism, harmonic richness, and vivid national color.<sup>15</sup>

The only noteworthy fluctuation in the composer's reception in his native country was, in fact, the temporary and politically motivated ban placed on his music in 1931 after he signed a public letter condemning the Bolshevik regime.<sup>16</sup> His charitable support of the Soviet Army during World War II restored him to favor, as the birthday congratulations sent him by the Union of Soviet Composers in 1943 indicate.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “Odin iz velichaishikh predstavitelei mirovogo pianisticheskogo iskusstva, zamechatel'nyi dirizher, vydaiushchiisia master fortepianoi, simfonicheskoi i vokal'noi muzyki. Romanticheskii pafos, muzhestvennaia sila sochetaiutsia v muzyke Rakhmaninova s lirikosozertsatel'nymi nastroeniiami. Ei svoistvenny shirokaia napevnost', bogatstvo garmonicheskogo iazyka, iarkost' natsional'nogo kolorita.”

<sup>16</sup> For the original account of this ban, see Riesemann, *Rachmaninoff's Recollections*, 200–04; this account is enlarged somewhat in Seroff, *Rachmaninoff*, 200–07; for an introductory discussion of Rachmaninoff's rehabilitation in Soviet Russia during World War II, see *ibid.*, 233–38. Pauline Fairclough has brought additional light to Rachmaninoff's critical reception in the Soviet Union during this period; she is, however, unaware of the letter that touched off the ban. See Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses*, 89–90, 185–91.

<sup>17</sup> This telegram contains an informative assessment in and of itself: “We greet you as a composer of whom Russian musical culture is proud, the greatest pianist of our time, a brilliant conductor and public man who in these times has shown patriotic feelings that have found a response in the heart of every Russian. We greet you as a creator of musical works penetrating in their depth and expressiveness. Your piano concertos and symphonies, your chamber works, songs, and other compositions are often played in the Soviet Union, and the public here watches with close attention your creative activity and is proud of your triumphs.” Union of Soviet Composers to Rachmaninoff, March 22, 1943, quoted in Bertensson, *Sergei Rachmaninoff*, 384. Unfortunately, Rachmaninoff's final illness had progressed to such an extent that he was unable to receive these greetings, and he died less than a week later.

Lexicons from other Eastern European countries also featured highly favorable assessments at this time. The 1960 edition of the Polish *Mala encyklopedia muzyki* (Little encyclopedia of music) describes Rachmaninoff's music as strongly Russian, bearing the traces not only of Tchaikovsky but also, in the songs, of Musorgsky. It also praises the piano works, "full of vividness and virtuosic brilliance" (pełne barwności i blasku wirtuozowskiego). A new assessment appeared in the second edition, published in 1968, praising Rachmaninoff's "formal discipline" (dyscyplina formy). "In his piano works," it continues, "Rachmaninoff eschewed stunts of a purely virtuosic or daring nature; he employed a variety of accompanimental forms, as well as varied dynamics and articulation."<sup>18</sup> The Yugoslavian *Muzicka enciklopedija* features an effusive assessment, published in 1963, by distinguished Czech-Serbian piano pedagogue and music critic Emil Hajek:

The themes of his works are expansive and long-breathed, possessing extraordinary melodic beauty; the romantic but essentially diatonic harmonic foundation is interesting and often very effective; the architectural structure—within the limits of traditional forms—is expertly crafted. Of his various works the Second and Third Concertos and *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* are among the most commonly performed works in the piano literature. His songs are real pearls of Russian vocal lyricism. The piano works significantly expand the expressive possibilities of the instrument, especially the original design of the moving accompaniments. Through all his work there runs a single lyrical, melancholic line, personal and typically Rachmaninoffian.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "W swych utworach fortepianowych Rachmaninow usunął chyty czysto wirtuozowskie, brawurowe; stosował różnorodne formy akompaniamentu, zróżnicowaną dynamikę i artykulację."

<sup>19</sup> "Teme njegovih dela širokog su raspona i daha, vanredne melodijske lepote; romantička harmonska podloga ali u biti dijatonska sveža je, zanimljiva i često veoma efektna; arhitektonska struktura—u granicama tradicionalnih oblika—znalački izradena. Od njegovih raznovrsnih dela II i III klavirski koncert pa Rapsodija na temu Paganinija ubrajaju se u najčešće izvodena dela klavirske literature. Njegove pesme pravi su biseri ruske vokalne lirike. Klavirske kompozicije znatno proširuju izražajne mogućnosti ovog instrumenta, naročito originalnim crtežima svojih pokretnih deonica. Kroz sva njegova dela provlači se jedna lirska, setna crta, njegova lična, tipična rahmanjinovska."

The 1965 edition of the Hungarian *Zenei Lexikon* retains its earlier assessment, adapting the wording but slightly and insignificantly.

By comparison with Schmidl's *Dizionario universale dei musicisti*, noted briefly above, Italian lexicons of the period suggest a firm establishment of Rachmaninoff's reputation there as a composer. The 1959 *Dizionario Ricordi della musica e dei musicisti* alludes to the question of Rachmaninoff's relative merits as a pianist and composer, siding with the latter: "A musician rich in inventive genius and solid craftsmanship, his work as a composer is both as valid and more lasting than as a virtuoso."<sup>20</sup> The assessment that appeared in 1964 in the four-volume *Enciclopedia della musica* likewise describes Rachmaninoff as "a composer of considerable importance. In his oeuvre," the entry continues, "the turbid and sensual romanticism of Tchaikovsky continues, characterized, however, by a personal search in the domain of melody and harmony."<sup>21</sup> Both lexicons reserve special praise for Rachmaninoff's songs.

#### Tempered Appreciation: France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden

Other European assessments of the period balance criticism and praise somewhat more evenly. Their criticism is sometimes harsh—especially the notion, encountered more frequently in this period, that Rachmaninoff's music is superficial—but in none of these is his legacy negated outright. In France, opinion appears to have been divided, for entries of this period vary considerably in length and tone. The decidedly positive assessment in the 1957 *Larousse de la musique* rejects a piano-centric view of the composer's oeuvre and states that Rachmaninoff

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<sup>20</sup> "Compositore di notevole importanza. Musicista ricco di estro inventivo e di solida scienza costruttiva, la sua opera di compositore è altrettanto valida e più duratura di quella virtuosistica."

<sup>21</sup> "Nella sua produzione continua il torbido e sensuale romanticismo di Ciakovski, caratterizzato però da una ricerca personale nel campo melodico e armonico."

combined the musical best of the West and of Russia. “Although he was one of the century’s great pianists,” it reads, “he was no mere ‘piano composer’: his inspiration, very pure, is founded on a perfect knowledge of Western music and of Russian folklore, and on a lyricism of the highest order, making him one of the best Russian composers of the twentieth century. Sincerity and sensibility are the dominant trademarks of his work.”<sup>22</sup>

By contrast, the unsigned entry that appeared in 1961 in Fasquelle’s splendidous *Encyclopédie de la musique* describes Rachmaninoff’s style with a single statement: “His work is marked by the predominant influence of Tchaikovsky.”<sup>23</sup> This brusque treatment can probably be attributed to the lexicon’s twentieth-century slant, which James Coover noted in his review of the work.<sup>24</sup> Numbered among its editors, collaborators, and patrons were many of the most prominent modernist composers of the mid-twentieth century, including Milton Babbitt, Pierre Boulez, Pierre Schaeffer, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Igor Stravinsky.

Falling somewhere in between these two is the assessment in Roland de Candé’s 1964 *Dictionnaire des musiciens*. The assessment, which identifies Rachmaninoff merely as “pianiste,” laments the composer’s indifference to stylistic innovation but praises the construction and inspiration of his music nonetheless:

This very great pianist is a very conventional composer who belongs neither to his time nor to any definite school. His music is solidly constructed and brilliantly written for the piano, but the generous lyricism that brought two of his works (the Second Concerto and

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<sup>22</sup> “Bien qu’il fût un des grands pianistes du siècle, il n’a jamais composé de la «musique de pianiste»: son inspiration, très pure, fondée sur une parfaite connaissance de la musique occidentale et du folklore russe, sur un lyrisme du meilleur aloi, fait de lui un des meilleurs compositeurs russes du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle. Sincérité et sensibilité sont les marques dominantes de son œuvre.”

<sup>23</sup> “Son œuvre est marquée par l’influence prédominante de Tchaïkovsky.”

<sup>24</sup> See Coover, review of vol. 1 of *Encyclopédie de la musique*, ed. François Michel, *Notes* 16 (June 1959): 382.

Prelude in C-sharp Minor) tremendous popular success adheres to an outmoded romanticism. A contemporary of Florent Schmitt, Schoenberg, and Ravel, he seems to have been totally indifferent to musical acquisitions of his time (Debussy was born eleven years before him); it is remarkable that such a gifted musician could have contented himself with the most worn-out formulas for utilizing a pleasantly rich melodic invention and an inspiration not devoid of grandeur.<sup>25</sup>

Assessments in two subsequent French works are brief but affirmative. “There is a certain lyricism, refined but not insipid, that sings in Rachmaninoff’s works,” notes the 1965 *La musique: Les hommes, les instruments, les œuvres*. “He never seeks to surprise; he moves without trying expressly to do so; but because he is sincere and sensitive, he is ever a musician of his time.”<sup>26</sup> The assessment also praises his “seventy-nine songs, for which he must be considered the creator of the Russian lied.”<sup>27</sup> The assessment that appeared in 1976 in Marc Honegger’s *Dictionnaire de la musique* notes that, “influenced by Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff introduces romantic eloquence into a cantilena of brilliant national color. He is at his best,” it adds, “in his piano pieces and symphonic compositions.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> “Ce très grand pianiste est un compositeur très conventionnel qui n’appartient ni à son temps, ni à une école déterminée. Sa musique est solidement construite et brillamment écrite pour le piano, mais le lyrisme généreux qui a valu à deux de ses œuvres (*Deuxième Concerto* et *Prélude en do dièse mineur*) un prodigieux succès populaire se réclame d’un romantisme désuet. Contemporain de Florent Schmitt, Schoenberg et Ravel, il semble être resté totalement indifférent aux acquisitions musicales de son temps (Debussy était né onze ans avant lui); il est remarquable qu’un musicien aussi doué ait pu se contenter des formules les plus usées pour exploiter une invention mélodique agréablement fertile et une inspiration non dépourvue de grandeur.”

<sup>26</sup> “C’est une sorte de lyrisme épuré et sans fadeur qui chante dans les oeuvres de Rachmaninov. Jamais il ne cherche à surprendre; il émeut sans tâcher expressément d’émouvoir; mais, parce qu’il est sincère et sensible, il demeure toujours un musicien de son temps.” *La musique: Les hommes, les instruments, les œuvres*, ed. Norbert Dufourcq (Paris: Larousse, 1965), 2:273.

<sup>27</sup> “Rachmaninov a composé . . . soixante-dix-neuf mélodies qui doivent le faire considérer comme la créateur du lied en Russie.” Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> “Influencé par Tchaïkovski, Rachmaninov introduit l’élouquence romantique dans une cantilène d’un brillant coloris national. Il a donné le meilleur de lui-même dans ses pièces pour piano et dans ses compositions symphoniques.”

Rachmaninoff's treatment in German lexicons at mid-century is brief, above all, but also benign. The fourth edition of Moser's *Musik Lexikon*, published in 1955, merely reproduces the entry from 1935 in an updated, but not corrected, form.<sup>29</sup> The assessment in Friedrich Herzfeld's *Lexikon der Musik* of 1957 embraces the basic East-West dichotomy characteristic of Russian musical nationalism but, at the same time, does not condemn Rachmaninoff on this basis. It notes simply that, "like Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff was Western-oriented," adding, somewhat critically, that "there dwells in his piano works a Slavic melancholy of an elevated salon tone." The entry notes further the popularity of his Prelude in C-sharp Minor and attests that "his four piano concertos are still performed, especially No. 2."<sup>30</sup> Save for this last clause, this commentary appears in all nine subsequent editions of this title published through 1989.<sup>31</sup> The new entry on Rachmaninoff that appeared in 1961 in the overhauled twelfth edition of the *Riemann Musik Lexikon*, edited by Wilibald Gurlitt, features somewhat enlarged biographical coverage but is still scarcely longer than the one by Einstein that it replaced, devoting but three sentences to Rachmaninoff's creative work as composer and performer. Nevertheless, one of these, noting the popularity of the Prelude in C-sharp Minor and the Second Concerto, makes an appeal for other works that "have not found appreciation corresponding to their worth."<sup>32</sup> It

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<sup>29</sup> The reference here to the Second Symphony in "A Minor" remains, not to be confused with the Third Symphony (see p. 46 n. 20 above).

<sup>30</sup> "Wie Tschaikowski war Rachmaninoff westlich orientiert. In seinen Klavierwerken lebt die slawische Melancholie eines gehobenen Salontones. Am berühmtesten ist sein *Prélude cis moll* aus den Klavier-Stücken opus 3. Seine 4 Klavierkonzerte werden noch gespielt, besonders das 2. opus 18 in c moll."

<sup>31</sup> The 1965 edition was published under two titles reflecting the names of its two publishers, *DBG-Musiklexikon* and *Ullstein Musiklexikon*, but all subsequent editions were published by Ullstein and bear its name.

<sup>32</sup> "Andere konnten keine ihrem Wert entsprechende Würdigung finden."

features a helpful bibliography but omits Rachmaninoff's last opus, the *Symphonic Dances*, from its otherwise respectable work list. (The article on Rachmaninoff that appeared at this time in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* was written by English musicologist Gerald Abraham and will be discussed below.)

Dutch lexicons published during this period are somewhat more critical of the composer. "Rachmaninoff's style," reads Casper Höweler's *X-Y-Z der muziek*, "is a mixture of Chopin, Schumann, and especially Tchaikovsky but has here and there a more modern allure. Unfortunately, even some of his best works sometimes suffer from a certain emptiness, which must then be covered with many notes."<sup>33</sup> The assessment also mentions the popularity of the Prelude in C-sharp Minor and the Piano Concertos and offers passing compliments to the Second Symphony and the chamber music. This popular lexicon appeared in sixteen editions between 1936 and 1966, in addition to several translations, before its author died in 1969.<sup>34</sup> Höweler forbade posthumous changes to the book,<sup>35</sup> but it maintained its popularity, appearing in eighteen posthumous "editions" (essentially reprints), the last in 1997. His assessment of Rachmaninoff appears unchanged in all of these.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> "De stijl van Rachmaninow is een mengsel van Chopin, Schumann en vooral Tsjaikowski, doch heeft hier en daar een iets moderner allure; helaas lijden zelfs enige van zijn beste werken bijwijlen aan een zekere leegte, die dan door veel noten bedekt moet worden." *X-Y-Z der muziek*, 9th ed. (1949). This assessment must have appeared in this lexicon before 1949, because it appears in a French translation published in 1947, but it does not yet appear in the third Dutch edition (1939). Unfortunately, I have been able to survey only some of this title's many editions.

<sup>34</sup> Translations include French, German, Serbian, and Spanish, which, with the exception of the German, appeared in multiple editions themselves.

<sup>35</sup> Van der Waa, "Snerpende sinustonen."

<sup>36</sup> A revised Dutch edition appeared in 2003 under the title *XYZ van de klassieke muziek*. Only in this edition did Rachmaninoff receive a new entry. See pp. 114–15 below.

Comparing Höweler's assessment with its counterparts in translated editions reveals nuances that may reflect, if only to a limited extent, critical trends in other regions. The French translation, *Sommets de la musique*, first published in 1947, displays a trifle more sympathy than the original, adding an "alas!" to the statement positing "a certain emptiness" in the music.<sup>37</sup> The opposite is true of the German translation, *Der Musikführer: Lexikon der Tonkunst*, published in 1952: omitting the word "some," the assessment reads, "even his best works display a certain emptiness," and the chamber music is no longer complimented.<sup>38</sup> The Spanish edition, meanwhile, followed the original assessment closely in its first edition, published in 1958, but the 1967 edition omits the statement about emptiness altogether.<sup>39</sup>

The assessment that appeared in 1957 in the *Encyclopedie van de muziek* notes, like Gurlitt, that the success of Second Concerto and Prelude in C-sharp Minor "has always overshadowed that of his other compositions."<sup>40</sup> Although the assessment states that Rachmaninoff's Third Concerto "contained little that was new and . . . could also hardly hold its own alongside the Second," it otherwise bears a rather close resemblance to Slonimsky's. Like the latter, it notes Rachmaninoff's kinship with Tchaikovsky but accords him an individuality arising from the Slavic character of his music:

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<sup>37</sup> "Mais il arrive, hélas! que même ses meilleures compositions présentent des vides d'inspiration." Seven French editions were issued between 1947 and 1967.

<sup>38</sup> "Leider zeigen selbst seine besten Werke eine gewisse Leere."

<sup>39</sup> The Spanish editions vacillate on this point: the 1978 edition again features the statement alleging "a certain emptiness," but the 2004 edition again omits it.

<sup>40</sup> "De twee werken die hem wereldberoemd zouden maken en waarvan het succes dat van zijn andere composities altijd heeft overschaduwd, componeerde Rachmaninow op betrekkelijk jeugdige leeftijd: *Tweede Pianoconcert* in 1901 en de *Prelude* in cis op. 3 no. 2 in 1892." An earlier Flemish lexicon does not feature critical commentary, C. Werda's *Muzikaal handwoordenboek* (ca. 1940).

Almost his whole oeuvre is characterized by an intense melancholy, which [is evident] among others in the frequent use of minor keys and in the broad, sustained melody. The noble lyricism of his themes, and the brilliant, effective passage work with which he surrounded this, are without question best exemplified by his Second Piano Concerto. Rachmaninoff's great veneration of Tchaikovsky was not without influence on his oeuvre. Yet his best works have a distinctly personal character, which is determined primarily through the assimilation of Slavic-tinged melodic material.<sup>41</sup>

The two principal Swedish music lexicons published at mid-century both feature a relatively thorough stylistic assessment of the composer. The 1946 *Bonniers illustrerade musiklexikon* is similar to Leonard's. Rachmaninoff's conservatism is observed but not criticized. His Western influences are noted, but he is still found to be authentically Russian, and Rachmaninoff the pianist is seen in unity with the composer:

Rachmaninoff was a man of the world among the composers of our time. . . . His works have an air of chivalry that was perhaps not up-to-date but that instead stood above time. If they lacked the scent of Russian soil that one finds in Musorgsky, Stravinsky, and Shostakovich, they had nevertheless a national accent of unmistakable origin. In our country, he was known primarily for his piano concertos. . . . His piano pieces have also attained great popularity. . . . His operas hardly reached over Russia's borders, but the two symphonies, the symphonic poems, the piano trio, and the cello sonata belong to the international repertoire. Rachmaninoff the pianist exhibited the same characteristics as the composer: supreme technical control, nobility, and imagination.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> "Bijna zijn gehele oeuvre wordt gekenmerkt door een intense melancholie, welke zich onder andere uit in het veelvuldig gebruik van de mineur-toonsoorten en in de brede, gedragen melodie. Van de nobele lyriek van zijn themata en het briljante, effectvolle passagewerk waarmee hij deze omrankt, vindt men ongetwijfeld in zijn *Tweede Pianoconcert* het beste voorbeeld. De grote verering voor Tsjajkowski is niet zonder invloed op Rachmaninows composities gebleven. Toch hebben zijn beste werken een uitgesproken persoonlijk karakter, dat voornamelijk door de verwerking van het Slavisch getinte, melodische materiaal bepaald wordt."

<sup>42</sup> "Rachmaninov var världsmannen bland vår tids tondiktare. . . . Hans verk har ett drag av ridderlighet, som kanske inte var tidsenligt, men som i stället stod över tiden. Om de saknade den doft av den ryska myllan, som man finner hos Mussorgskij, Stravinskij och Sjostakovitj, så hade de dock ett nationellt tonfall, om vars ursprung man inte kunde misstaga sig. I vårt land var han närmast känd genom sina pianokonsorter. . . . Stor popularitet nådde även hans pianostycken. . . . Hans operor nådde väl knappast över Rysslands gränser, men de båda symfonierna, de symfoniska dikterna, pianotriön och violoncellsonaten tillhör den internationella repertoaren. Pianist Rachmaninov uppvisade samma karaktärsdrag som tonsättaren: suverän behärskning av de tekniska hjälpmedlen, nobless och fantasi."

The assessment by music critic Åke Brandel that appeared in 1952 in the *Sohlmans musiklexikon* is similar.<sup>43</sup> It also acknowledges certain “harsh criticism” (bister kritik) facing the composer, even conceding “that much of Rachmaninoff’s work is to be considered superficial” (att åtskilliga av Rachmaninovs verk skatta åt det ytliga). This critical statement is followed, however, by an affirmative one: “But the Second Symphony, symphonic poem *Isle of the Dead*, Second and Third Piano Concertos, a long string of smaller piano pieces, songs, etc., seem to possess the potential to survive temporary changes of taste.”<sup>44</sup> The ensuing stylistic commentary notes his music’s “melodic richness” (melodirikedomen), “Slavic intensity” (den slaviska intensiteten), “exemplary” (föredömlig) balance of the various performing forces in his music, and “suggestive balance of agitated and quiet moments, tension and rest” (suggestiv avvägning mellan upprörda och rofyllda moment, anspänning och vila).

The assessments from this period that have been surveyed up to this point vary considerably in length, emphasis, and tone, but together they provide a strong corrective to Carruthers’s assertion, quoted in the introduction, that Blom’s assessment is “typical of critical appraisals from the 1950s and 1960s.” Although they shared Blom’s conceptual parameters—evaluating the music in terms of its construction, stylistic contemporaneity, and Russianness—

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<sup>43</sup> A brief biographical description and a catalog of Brandel’s archival materials can be found at the website of the Swedish Musik- och teaterbibliotek: <http://musikverket.se/musikochteaterbiblioteket/arkivregistret/ake-brandel-1923-2001/>. In addition to his criticism, Brandel was noted for his research on the Berwalds, a Swedish family of musicians and composers active during the first half of the nineteenth century. See Brandel, “Släkten Berwald: Dess tidigare historia och dess verksamhet i Ryssland” [The Berwald family: Its past history and activities in Russia], in “Studier tillägnade Carl-Allan Moberg, 5 Juni 1961” [A festschrift in honor of Carl-Allan Moberg], special issue, *Svensk tidskrift för musikforskning* [Swedish journal for musicology] 43 (1961): 89–98.

<sup>44</sup> “Men den 2. symfoni, den symfonisk dikten »Dödens ö», pianokonserterna nr 2 och 3, en lång rad smärre pianostycken, sånger, med mera synas äga förutsättningar att överleva tillfälliga smakväxlingar.”

they by no means shared his conclusions. In this period, as before, most lexicons described Rachmaninoff as a multifaceted, technically skilled composer with a distinctive musical personality.

### English Dissent and Its Aftermath

What Blom's assessment typified was a view held by a small echelon of the mid-century English musical establishment that included Percy Scholes, Blom himself, and Gerald Abraham. These three eminent English musical commentators all engaged in scholarly research and music criticism in varying degrees and wielded important channels of musical opinion.<sup>45</sup> Like some of the European commentators just cited, they acknowledged certain misgivings about Rachmaninoff's music; unlike the former, however, they concluded that his music had little worth and would likely disappear. According to these, Rachmaninoff's greatest achievement was as a pianist, while otherwise he was little more than a cosmopolitan piano composer. Their view was well-nigh diametrically opposed to that of their counterparts in the United States, as we have seen, and in Russia as well, as we will see below. It is tempting to assume, as some have, that a downturn in Rachmaninoff's critical reception at mid-century such as we will observe presently in England must be attributable somehow to the modernistic aesthetic disposition of the age,<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> A 1948 letter from Scholes to Abraham in which the former mentions all three of these commentators together offers some indication that they may have conceived of themselves as somewhat of a trio: "You, Eric Blom and I are laboring ants, rushing hither and thither and piling ever higher our ant hills of paper." Quoted in Kenneth Shenton, "Everyman and His Music: Percy Scholes (1877–1958)," Musicweb International, May 2008, [http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2008/May08/Percy\\_Scholes.htm](http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2008/May08/Percy_Scholes.htm). If this is the case, however, it was not a trio based on mutual admiration, which Slonimsky asserted did not exist between Scholes and Blom. Slonimsky, "Lexicographis," 765.

<sup>46</sup> See Gehl, "Reassessing a Legacy," 5.

but these assessments give no evidence of such bias. Indeed, musical modernism itself was felt not nearly so strongly in England at this time as it was on the European continent.

In their unusually skeptical outlook on Rachmaninoff, these commentators departed not only from general but also from English lexicographical opinion, which must be emphasized. Newmarch's benign entry in *Grove's* had been reprinted and updated in intermittent editions of that work, and Bantock's favorable assessment was, as we have seen, widely circulated. Additionally, several other British lexicons published throughout this whole period treat Rachmaninoff in a much more normal light. For example, Robert Illing's *Dictionary of Music*, published by Penguin in 1950, describes Rachmaninoff as "a distinguished pianist and an able composer." Arthur Jacobs authored *A New Dictionary of Music* for Penguin in 1958, which notes simply that Rachmaninoff "always maintained a Russian outlook and wrote in an emotional (and sometimes melancholy) romantic style." This assessment was carried into every subsequent edition of this title by Jacobs, published in 1967, 1973, 1977, 1991, and 1996.<sup>47</sup> *The Concise Encyclopedia of Music and Musicians*, which also appeared in 1958, acknowledges the popularity of Rachmaninoff's piano concertos but notes, not unlike Gurlitt's *Riemann*, that "his other music, including songs, choral works and the three symphonies, which some critics consider his best works, are more rarely heard." The editor of this lexicon, Martin Cooper, carried this assessment unchanged into all three subsequent editions of this title, which appeared in 1971, 1975, and 1978. Indeed, the assessment may have been written by Cooper, whose other writings suggest an appreciative attitude of the composer.<sup>48</sup> The assessment in Jack Westrup and

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<sup>47</sup> Only the last of these editions contains any alteration: the last phrase has been replaced with another one stating that Rachmaninoff's Russian outlook "permeated his style."

<sup>48</sup> See both Cooper's *Ideas and Music* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1965) and the posthumous volume edited by his son, Cooper, *Judgments of Value: Selected Writings on Music*, ed. Dominic Cooper (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Frank Harrison's 1960 *New College Encyclopedia of Music* abstains from evaluative commentary.

Nevertheless, the dissenting trio of commentators wielded more authority, and their assessments were more widely circulated. Scholes led the charge in 1938 in the inaugural edition of his *Oxford Companion to Music*. Though active for a time as a critic at the *Evening Standard*, Scholes became better known for his many popular books on music.<sup>49</sup> Like his *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music*, the *Oxford Companion* remains in print to this day, having undergone periodic revisions by subsequent editors. Issued in no fewer than nine editions in its first eighteen years, it was hailed by A. Hyatt King in the fifth edition of *Grove's* as containing "the most extraordinary range of musical knowledge, ingeniously 'self-indexed,' ever written and assembled between two covers by one man."<sup>50</sup> Scholes's assessment of Rachmaninoff first appeared in 1929, in his *Listener's History of Music*,<sup>51</sup> and it appeared unchanged, save for biographical updates, in each of the nine editions of *The Oxford Companion* produced by Scholes before his death in 1958. Scholes viewed Rachmaninoff as an excellent pianist who as a composer was little more than a gifted miniaturist. Whereas many assessments surveyed so far describe Rachmaninoff as a distinctly Russian composer, Scholes maintained the opposite view of the composer's national musical identity:

As a pianist he has toured the world extensively, as a conductor he is much respected, and as a composer he has made a mark, though possibly not a lasting one, since his works, very skillfully written, are for the most part inspired by no very strong national or

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<sup>49</sup> For example, see Percy A. Scholes, *The Listener's Guide to Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1919); Scholes, *The Complete Book of Great Musicians* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923); and Scholes, *The Listener's History of Music*, 3 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1923–29).

<sup>50</sup> *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 5th ed., s.v. "dictionaries," by A. Hyatt King.

<sup>51</sup> Scholes, *The Listener's History of Music*, 1st ed., 3:81.

personal feeling, being cosmopolitan and general in their expression. . . . Probably some of his best work has been put into the smaller piano pieces and the songs, many of which are perfect in their kind.

Scholes's opinion of Rachmaninoff's relative musical merits can also be discerned in his 1955 *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music*, where a carefully placed semicolon ensures that his high regard of Rachmaninoff's pianism will not be confused for that of his music: "Made high reputation in old and new worlds as pianist of great artistry; composed operas, [etc.]"<sup>52</sup>

As Scholes's assessment is the first yet encountered in this study to question the longevity of Rachmaninoff's music, we can begin to take note of the reasoning behind such dismissals and clarify this aspect of the composer's reception. We will see later in this chapter that some commentators have dismissed Rachmaninoff because of his adherence to a tonal language and musical forms that were more common in the nineteenth century than in the twentieth. Scholes is not one of them. He maintained a balanced appreciation of contemporary music, but his taste and historical outlook were much more varied and all-encompassing than the stereotypical modernist to seek an explanation of this kind for his negative regard for Rachmaninoff's music.<sup>53</sup> More importantly, his assessment itself does not evince a concern with musical progressivism.

What it does concern is cosmopolitanism, the antithesis of authenticity as formulated by the Russian nationalists. As a survey of various entries in Scholes's *Oxford Companion* reveals, he considered cosmopolitanism to be intrinsically indicative of a lack of musical value and thus

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<sup>52</sup> John Ward completed the first posthumous editions of both *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1964) and *The Oxford Companion* (1970), leaving Scholes's assessments of Rachmaninoff unchanged.

<sup>53</sup> For a detailed expression of Scholes's views on early-twentieth-century musical developments see, in addition to various entries in his *Oxford Companion*, "Period VIII: The Anti-romantics," in his *Listener's History of Music*, 3:121–29.

of permanence.<sup>54</sup> Scholes associated musical quality with stylistic originality, which he defined as “actual novelty in melody, harmony, form, orchestration, etc., and a strong expression of personality allied to a high degree of craftsmanship.”<sup>55</sup> According to Scholes, a composer’s “national or racial feeling” played an important role in fostering originality by “keeping himself free from conventions.”<sup>56</sup> Scholes conceived of cosmopolitanism as the antithesis of originality in both its individual and national manifestations and thus indicative of a lack of permanent musical value. “Good music,” says Scholes, “is ‘individual’ and ‘personal,’” while “music lacking vitality [i.e., bad music] . . . is generally found to be a diluted extract of that of some other composer, or perhaps of so many other composers that no one composer can be named.”<sup>57</sup> Yet Scholes tended to reserve the term for use in a nationalistic context: a composer’s “racial or national characteristics,” he explains, will lead to innovation only when they have not been “stultified” by the adoption “of a mere cosmopolitan convention.”<sup>58</sup> By applying the term to Rachmaninoff, Scholes implied that the composer’s claim to distinction hinged more on his fidelity to stylistic hallmarks of Russian nationalism than on his individual characteristics.

Scholes commented on national character as a matter of course in his evaluations of Russian composers. His view of Russian nationalism, such as he expressed in the following description of Musorgsky, was typical: “Like some other Russian musical pioneers (cf. *Glinka*,

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<sup>54</sup> The following analysis takes as its text the ninth edition of *The Oxford Companion to Music*, the last edition produced by Scholes himself. Owing to the length of some of the entries cited here, I have opted to provide page numbers rather than entry titles in the notes that follow.

<sup>55</sup> Scholes, *The Oxford Companion to Music*, 9th ed., 223.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 679.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 854.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 679.

*Balakiref*) he got much of his inspiration from folk music heard in childhood and the folk tales he also heard gave him the literary basis for much of his composition.”<sup>59</sup> But Scholes was also willing to adopt a more flexible view of Russianness, sometimes in what seems a justification for an otherwise independent preference. “Tchaikovsky . . . is at once cosmopolitan and nationalist,” wrote Scholes, “—and a good deal more nationalist than is often admitted, the intense emotionalism of many of his works, with the love of extremes in both the bright colored and the somber, being a clear reflection of one prominent side of the Russian temperament.”<sup>60</sup> Scholes justified Scriabin’s Russianness in a similar manner: “Very Russian, at any rate in his quasi-religious mysticism and forceful expression (though quite un-national in his musical idiom) was Scriabin. . . . Less so,” Scholes continued, “was the romantic-classic Rachmaninoff.”<sup>61</sup> Given the obvious similarities between Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky, and even Scriabin—they all utilized classic forms in varying degrees and espoused a passionate lyrical idiom—it is difficult to discern the essential basis for the distinctions that Scholes draws between Rachmaninoff and the other two, especially since his general view of Rachmaninoff hinged on this aspect of his music.

Scholes’s designation of Rachmaninoff as a romantic-classic is, in fact, the only aspect of his regard for the composer that appears to suggest a positive value relation between stylistic progress and musical value. But the relation is at best superficial. The designation appears at first to consign Rachmaninoff to a lesser category of romantic composers who utilized classic forms such as the sonata and the symphony when these were, even in the nineteenth century,

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 674.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 908.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* Similar comments about the Russianness of Scriabin and Tchaikovsky are also featured in their entries in *The Oxford Companion* and his *Listener’s History of Music*, 3:51–52.

increasingly thought to be obsolete. Scholes's dichotomy between conventionalism and originality described above (the latter signifying musical value) would appear to imply a parallel dichotomy with classicism and romanticism, since Scholes understood these terms to reflect opposing attitudes toward formal procedure—*classical* as “a more or less consciously accepted formalistic scheme of design,”<sup>62</sup> while *romantic* entailed “subordinating form to [some extra-musical subject].”<sup>63</sup> Upon closer inspection, however, Scholes used the term “romantic-classic” in a purely descriptive, as opposed to evaluative, capacity: Brahms, Bruckner, Dohnányi, Elgar, Fauré, Mahler, and Reger are all discussed in terms of some combination of classical and romantic elements, just as Franck and Richard Strauss are described as a “Christian romantic” and a “Pagan romantic” respectively to distinguish their differing spiritual temperaments.<sup>64</sup> Scholes questioned the legitimacy of Rachmaninoff's oeuvre not because he found it too conventional or outmoded per se but because he thought it lacked distinction, especially in its evocation of Russian national identity.

In assessing Rachmaninoff, Blom followed very much in Scholes's footsteps. Blom's lexicographical activities came at the end of his career, most of which was spent as a critic with successive posts at the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Birmingham Post*, and the *London Observer*. He also wrote several books on music and served as editor of *Music and Letters* and Dent's popular Master Musicians Series, from which he excluded Rachmaninoff.<sup>65</sup> Blom first hinted at

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<sup>62</sup> Scholes, *The Oxford Companion to Music*, 9th ed., 174–75.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 892.

<sup>64</sup> Scholes, *Listener's History of Music*, 2:137, 3:32, 3:43, 3:58, 3:60, 3:61, 3:67, 3:75, 3:85.

<sup>65</sup> Geoffrey Norris, e-mail message to author, January 5, 2015. Jack Westrup assumed the editorship of the series after Blom's death in 1959 and subsequently admitted the composer, whereupon Norris wrote the biography.

his disdain for Rachmaninoff's music with a remark about the "notoriously popular C-sharp Minor Prelude" in his founding edition of the *Everyman's Dictionary of Music*, published in 1946. His commentary in the 1954 edition of *Grove's* was outlined in the introduction. As an encyclopedic work, *Grove's* could accommodate a full expression of his view of the composer. This did not, however, require much space, and the following excerpt reproduces all of the independent evaluative commentary on Rachmaninoff that Blom contributed to this edition:

As a pianist Rachmaninoff was one of the finest artists of his time; as a composer he can hardly be said to have belonged to his time at all, and he represented his country only in the sense that accomplished but conventional composers like Glazunov or Arensky did. He had neither the national characteristics of the Balakirev school nor the individuality of Taneyev or Medtner. Technically he was highly gifted, but also severely limited. His music is well constructed and effective, but monotonous in texture, which consists in essence mainly of artificial and gushing tunes accompanied by a variety of figures derived from arpeggios.

The enormous popular success some few of Rachmaninoff's works had in his lifetime is not likely to last, and musicians never regarded it with much favor. The third pianoforte Concerto was on the whole liked by the public only because of its close resemblance to the second, while the fourth, which attempted something like a new departure, was a failure from the start. The only later work that has attracted large audiences was the Rhapsody (variations) on a Theme by Paganini for pianoforte and orchestra.

Though relatively brief, this commentary traverses several ideas, which are best considered one at a time. The only suggestion of any value relation based on stylistic contemporaneity comes at the very beginning: the phrase "his time" creates a parallelism by which Rachmaninoff's excellence as a pianist is tacitly contrasted with his stature as a composer. This relation is not openly stated or developed any further, and, as we will see below, Blom did not in fact espouse such a value relation generally. Its presence here appears to be incidental, an act of rhetorical play.

By contrast, two sentences are devoted to the national question that so preoccupied Scholes. The two writers maintained virtually identical views of Russian music.<sup>66</sup> The only changes Blom made to Newmarch's original entry, aside from updating the biographical portion, also reflected this nationalistic paradigm. Newmarch had written that "the musical influences of Moscow are clearly evident in the works of Rachmaninoff"; Blom changed this to "the cosmopolitan rather than the nationalist musical influences of Moscow." This is not merely a benign substitution, since, as we saw with Scholes, cosmopolitanism bore negative connotations for Russian composers.

Blom also ventured criticism of Rachmaninoff's compositional technique, by which is presumably meant his handling of form and instrumentation as opposed to the intrinsic quality of his musical materials per se. He was the first to do so in a music lexicon. Until now, comment on this aspect of Rachmaninoff's music was invariably and unambiguously favorable. Remy attributed the "stirring effect" of his music not only to "the inherent beauty and expressiveness of his themes" but also to "their logical, masterly development." Bantock described the music as "classical in spirit and technique" and the piano concertos as "grateful to the soloist, and very effectively scored for orchestra." Kolodin likewise praised Rachmaninoff's orchestration and noted that "in its technical aspects the [*Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*] entitled him to a place

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<sup>66</sup> This is clear enough from their assessments of Rachmaninoff, but compare also the following description of Tchaikovsky by Blom with Scholes's description above: "His alternate elations and depressions, his self-doubts and self-questionings, his changes from abject gloom by way of frivolity to moods of fate-defying triumph, as in the Fifth Symphony, his plunges from deep into deeper despair, as in the Sixth . . . all this is Russian and nothing else, even if we cannot point at this or that musical passage and say that it is, or that it descends from, a genuine national song or dance." Blom, *Some Great Composers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), 107–08. This book offers an interesting snapshot of contemporaneous views of the national and universal in classical music. Nine of the fifteen composers featured are ethnically German, of which only two (Bach and Haydn) occasion any noteworthy amount of nationally oriented commentary. By contrast, all of the non-Germans are introduced with reference to their national traditions, and none of these more extensively or apologetically than Tchaikovsky.

beside such masters of the variation form as Schumann, Brahms, Richard Strauss, and Elgar.” Leonard praised Rachmaninoff’s “masterful command of the orchestra, and his ability to sustain, in the difficult large forms, a lofty inspiration.” The assessment in *Bonniers* noted his “supreme technical control” both as pianist and as composer. Even Scholes concurred, for he wrote that Rachmaninoff’s works were “very skillfully written.” Blom, by contrast, appears to have considered Rachmaninoff’s technical equipment not so much the product of skill or mastery but of being “highly gifted,” with the presumably related caveat that he was at the same time “severely limited.” Nevertheless, Blom is conflicted on this point, for he then describes the music as “well constructed and effective, but monotonous.” At any rate, Blom clearly considered Rachmaninoff a piano composer: he does not mention or discuss any music other than that for the piano (mention of the first two symphonies was retained from Newmarch), and his phrase “gushing tunes accompanied by a variety of figures derived from arpeggios” obviously bears strong reference to that instrument.

The significance of Blom’s assessment in the history of Rachmaninoff’s critical reception would be difficult to overestimate. “The article in *Grove* is important,” as Martyn correctly observed, “because it remained holy writ for so long and enshrined prejudices and misconceptions that were rehashed in different contexts again and again over the years.”<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the fifth edition of *Grove’s* remained in print for more than twenty-five years, being reissued no less than ten times between its initial publication in 1954 and that of the edition that supplanted it in 1980, on average every two to three years.<sup>68</sup> During this time and afterward, it proved a source of obvious annoyance to the composer’s admirers, who have cited and rebutted

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<sup>67</sup> Barrie Martyn, *Rachmaninoff*, 16.

<sup>68</sup> To be precise, in 1955, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1964, 1966, 1968, 1970, 1973, and 1975.

it with tireless persistence, making it in all likelihood the most frequently cited assessment of Rachmaninoff in any form of musical commentary. This has, ironically, ensured the immortality of the very assessment that the composer's advocates would prefer more than any other to consign to oblivion.

Blom's commentary first elicited comment in 1968, when it provided the impetus for Harold Schonberg's *New York Times* editorial bemoaning Rachmaninoff's poor critical reception. There Schonberg dismissed the commentary as "one of the most outrageous and even stupid statements ever to be found in a work that is supposed to be an objective reference."<sup>69</sup> Schonberg subsequently adapted the editorial—including its derogatory description of the assessment, in which "outrageous" now became "outrageously snobbish"—for inclusion in his immensely popular *Lives of the Great Composers*.<sup>70</sup> First published in 1970, the book appeared in two subsequent editions, in 1981 and 1997, and in numerous reprints, translations, and reprinted translations, including versions in Chinese, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Spanish, and, most recently, Turkish. In his 1973 centennial reappraisal of the composer, Stephen Walsh referred to the assessment from *Grove's* repeatedly, the last time referring to its author as "the unfortunate Blom."<sup>71</sup> Coolidge quoted the assessment in his 1979 article on Rachmaninoff's concerto forms, describing it as "all the more stinging because of its deceptively charitable tone."<sup>72</sup> The assessment found its way also into Martyn's 1990 biography, introduced by the author with the merciless comment that "prejudice, contempt, and ignorance were all

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<sup>69</sup> Schonberg, "Rachmaninoff?"

<sup>70</sup> Schonberg, *The Lives of the Great Composers* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), 506–08.

<sup>71</sup> Walsh, "Sergei Rachmaninoff," 17.

<sup>72</sup> Coolidge, "Architectonic Technique," 180.

ingloriously combined in the patronizing and by now notorious article.”<sup>73</sup> Teachout likewise quoted Blom’s assessment in his 2002 editorial on the composer’s reception, deriding it as a “sniffy passage” that reminded him of Percy Grainger’s remark that “the world around me is dying of ‘good taste.’”<sup>74</sup> The article from *Grove*’s is now widely quoted on the Web, where *Wikipedia* in particular is serving as a source for its further dissemination (and continuing derision).<sup>75</sup>

Surprisingly, no one has ever paused to evaluate Blom’s assessment against the backdrop of his other writings. In their eagerness to dismiss the assessment, Rachmaninoff’s supporters have failed to observe how uncharacteristically biased it is for Blom, how little it reflects the real virtues that earned him his esteem as a commentator. His writings reveal him to be a thoughtful, sensitive, erudite, intelligent, and even humorous critic possessed of high artistic standards but by no means dogmatic in his appreciation of various musical styles. According to his colleague Nicolas Slonimsky, Blom was, moreover, “a man of infinite charm.”<sup>76</sup> It is hoped that the detail with which his views are presented in the following pages is justified by the prominence that his assessment of Rachmaninoff has achieved. It’s time that Blom had a fair hearing.

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<sup>73</sup> Martyn, *Rachmaninoff*, 16.

<sup>74</sup> Teachout, “What Was the Matter,” 47. See also, in chronological order, David Wright, “Rachmaninoff Makes Converts of His Critics,” *New York Times*, May 19, 1998; Robert E. Cunningham, Jr., “Harmonic Prolongation in Selected Works of Rachmaninoff, 1910–1931, PhD dissertation (Florida State University, 1999), 319–20; Carruthers, “The (Re)Appraisal of Rachmaninov’s Music,” 44–45; Gehl, “Reassessing a Legacy,” 5–6; Johnston, “Harmony and Climax,” 1.

<sup>75</sup> See *Wikipedia*, s.vv. “Eric Blom” and “Sergei Rachmaninoff.” For an example of its dissemination via *Wikipedia*, see “Eric Blom’s Dictionary of Music,” *Uninformed Comment* (blog), July 22, 2009, <https://uninformedcomment.wordpress.com/2009/07/22/eric-bloms-dictionary-of-music/>. Amusingly, two of Blom’s grandchildren commented on this post.

<sup>76</sup> Slonimsky, *Perfect Pitch*, 194. See pp. 192–99 for Slonimsky’s candid reminiscences not only of Blom but also of Alfred Einstein, Scholes, and Oscar Thompson.

The book that offers the clearest exposition of Blom's critical views in theoretical terms is perhaps his *Limitations of Music*, where he posits a direct correlation between the value of a composer's work and that composer's "ability to subordinate his invention to certain limitations" prescribed by individual temperament and native musical environment.<sup>77</sup> Within these broad parameters, Blom grants the composer a considerable degree of latitude in determining and honoring individual limitations:

Nothing could be more wrong-headed in a music critic than a wish to prescribe the same limitations to every composer; so long as there be some sort of clearly defined boundary and he keep successfully inside, the drawing of the line may be determined by his personal temper. The restrictions may be wholly of his own making or they may be ordained by tradition: what matters ultimately is whether he knows how to respect them, whatever they may be.<sup>78</sup>

Blom would have the composer maintain this autonomy even at the risk of unpopularity. "An artist must be honest with himself," he wrote, "or he will not long impress his listeners as being sincere. He must at all costs, even at the cost of seeming out of harmony with his time, show himself as he is, not as he thinks he ought to be."<sup>79</sup> The book closes with a "justification of criticism" in which these sentiments now assume a creed-like status:

The critic's first duty is to appreciate all the good in the object of his criticism without becoming injudiciously appreciative. In order to do this he must be able to discover the good; in other words, to distinguish it from the bad. In these circumstances he is constrained to discuss the defects of a work at least as searchingly as its merits. . . .  
 . . . It is incumbent on him to reckon with the limitations of art and to judge how far the artist overcomes them successfully without doing violence either to his work or to his individuality. Once he has understood this obligation and gained the conviction that limitations can form attractive features in art and indeed rise to the status of merits, he

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<sup>77</sup> Blom, *The Limitations of Music: A Study in Aesthetics* (London, 1928; repr., New York: Benjamin Blom, 1972), 1, 15–18.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

may censure safely and never fear that he will lose his benevolence towards the artist or his reverence for art.<sup>80</sup>

True to this statement, Blom maintained an appreciation of a variety of musical styles. His affection for Mozart is well known, evident not only in his biography of the composer but also elsewhere in *Limitations*: “All that is beyond dispute,” he wrote there, “is that he is the greatest artist among creative musicians, just as Bach is the greatest craftsman and Beethoven the greatest inventor.”<sup>81</sup> If a superlative declaration such as this reveals a classicist streak, Blom was no less comfortable with romantic music. Nor were his allegiances exclusively German, as indicated by his apologetic stance toward Tchaikovsky.<sup>82</sup> In fact, Blom questioned the fairness of an overly nationalist critique of music in general:

Is it not enough for a composer to be English or French or Spanish or what not by race and to express himself naturally according to his racial disposition? May he not be allowed to give free rein to his personal idiosyncrasies as well? . . .

The true master reveals his artistic patriotism through things far more deep-seated and subtle than idiomatic turns of expression.<sup>83</sup>

Blom’s taste also encompassed twentieth-century modernism. Recounting the classical conception of “absolute beauty,” which constrained realistic depiction and thus forced the artist “to make a compromise between truth and beauty,” Blom wrote that “modern art does not necessarily accept this obligation.”<sup>84</sup> “Bartók was born a genius,” he wrote, whose marked

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 166, 168.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>82</sup> See, for example, page 75 note 64. Blom was also the author of *Tchaikovsky: Orchestral Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927).

<sup>83</sup> Blom, *The Limitations of Music*, 137, 139.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 11.

individuality so assimilated his native folk idiom as to “become universally significant”;<sup>85</sup> he also praised Bartók’s “amazing and hauntingly beautiful first violin and piano sonata,” whose pervasive minor seconds and augmented octaves exposed ideas that “are surely among the loveliest things music can be called upon to express.”<sup>86</sup> He also displayed sympathy for emotionally cooler music:

If a composer chooses to be a geometrical rather than an emotional artist, he has a right to be judged for such art as he is able to make out of mathematics. He may be only producing the equivalent of wallpapers—as Prokofiev often does, for instance—but the only reasonable attitude to take up is to decide whether the wallpapers are good as such, not to complain that they are deficient in the qualities of autumnal sunsets, lyric poetry, and golden syrup.<sup>87</sup>

Blom did not, however, shun tradition and convention per se as enemies to modern art. Modern art “may still, if its tendency lie that way, conform to [classical beauty] with success,” he wrote.<sup>88</sup> So too in matters of form: “Much as one values the trials of new musical forms,” wrote Blom, “it would be a distinct loss if composers did not continue to use the highly evolved one of the sonata. It is nothing but an affectation of up-to-dateness to consider it as being worn out.”<sup>89</sup> Though he thanked twentieth-century realists and rationalists for “reacting against what they disdainfully call nineteenth-century mawkishness,”<sup>90</sup> Blom objected to extreme musical objectivity: “If we do not want sentimentality—and the artistically well-bred of the nineteenth

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<sup>85</sup> Blom, “Bartók as Quartet Writer,” in his *Stepchildren of Music* (1926; repr., Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1967), 240–41.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 241 and accompanying footnote.

<sup>87</sup> Blom, “The Bugbear of Modernism,” in *A Musical Postbag* (New York: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1941), 155–56.

<sup>88</sup> Blom, *The Limitations of Music*, 11–12.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>90</sup> Blom, “Of Sentiment and Sentimentality,” in *A Musical Postbag*, 146.

century do so as little as those of the twentieth—we can, goodness knows, do with sentiment to leaven the depressionist art of today. We do not want all barren leaves and dusty answers.”<sup>91</sup>

In keeping with this flexible attitude, Blom called at various times for an appreciation of music that he felt didn’t entirely possess the distinction of the core classical repertory. Such was the case with what he termed “semi-permanent music”—that is, music so perfectly allied to its time that it cannot and need not be expected to achieve permanence. “Is it necessary,” Blom asks, “for music always to achieve permanence? May not a composer quite legitimately write something that should entertain us for a while until fashion has left it behind? . . . We had far better make up our minds that many things in art, including some quite good things, are evanescent.”<sup>92</sup> As examples of such music Blom offered Gustav Holst’s *Planets* and William Walton’s *Belshazzar’s Feast*, neither of which he felt would “last very long; but they are magnificent just now.”<sup>93</sup> He also wrote apologetically of “prettiness” in music, when such a work possesses enough “character.” “This Sullivan’s operettas possess in full measure,” he wrote, “both in the sense of individuality and genuineness of craftsmanship. His work has not only refinement: it has features.”<sup>94</sup> He cites a number of classical pieces as well that fit such a description.<sup>95</sup> On another occasion Blom wrote a piece defending “the lowbrow attitude to

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>92</sup> Blom, “Semi-Permanent Music,” in *A Musical Postbag*, 150–51, 152.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>94</sup> Blom, “Prettiness,” in *A Musical Postbag*, 160.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 161–62.

highbrow music,” which he found “as little deserving of censure . . . as the man in the street is who likes his familiar tunes.”<sup>96</sup>

If these statements reveal Blom’s open-minded approach to twentieth-century music—indeed to all music—he was by no means a de facto modernist. In fact, he had reservations about the two foremost modernists of his era, Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Though he admired Stravinsky’s early ballets, he was selective in his appreciation of the neoclassical works and thought that the composer’s thirst for innovation often led to works whose importance was more theoretical than aesthetic: “More than half of Stravinsky’s work affords a dire example of the futility of innovation for its own sake,” he wrote. “Everlastingly experimenting, pottering, explaining intentions which ought to be perfectly clear, he has little time for real achievement.”<sup>97</sup> Blom’s refined sense of humor is on full display in his editorial on “the twelve-note system.” He opens the piece with a characteristically levelheaded summary of the “democratic” virtues of the system—a new musical “state” in which “the meanest chromatic retainer is its neighbor’s equal and that ancient delinquent, the augmented fourth, has been abolished.”<sup>98</sup> Following an astute and grateful comment on Ernst Krenek’s explanation of the system in the latter’s *Über neue Musik*, Blom asks:

But what of his conclusions? Is the small group of composers who have embraced this new creed doing anything more than writing what is unquestionably a “new music”? Is it establishing the beginnings of a music of the future, perhaps the only possible music for the future? One can only say that one hopes not, unless indeed one ventures to add that one thinks anything of the kind quite impossible on the lines at present pursued by the Schoenberg school. The utter frigidity and dryness and joylessness of most of the twelve-note music so far turned out with the aid of this system makes even Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* with its synthetic humanity actuated by nothing but glandular functions

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<sup>96</sup> Blom, “Association and Appreciation,” in *A Musical Postbag*, 283.

<sup>97</sup> Blom, *The Limitations of Music*, 117, 116–18.

<sup>98</sup> Blom, “The Twelve-Note System,” in *A Musical Postbag*, 179.

look like a paradise of poetry by comparison: it is in fact as appalling as the worst of H. G. Wells's *Things to Come*. As the new resources are at present employed, they amount to a system and nothing more. They are in fact not so much resources as a whole series of deliberately contrived hindrances.<sup>99</sup>

As these quotations show, Blom's sympathies for modern music cannot be said to have amounted to a firm allegiance to it, and, as this editorial was written in 1937, one can only guess at how he might have responded to the even stricter serial procedures of the 1950s—the “height of modernism” that his assessment of Rachmaninoff has been assumed to reflect.

Quite the contrary. In a grandly ironic twist, although Blom had a greater appetite for modern music than Rachmaninoff, the two appear to have held similar views on the fundamental nature of the art. To begin with, Rachmaninoff also maintained a negative outlook on interwar twelve-tone music, or at least he strongly implied this in an article in 1941. “I have no sympathy,” he wrote, “with the composer who produces works according to preconceived formulas or preconceived theories. . . . [Music] should not be arrived at mentally, tailor-made to fit certain specifications—a tendency, I regret to say, all too prevalent during the past twenty years or so.”<sup>100</sup> Rather, Rachmaninoff regarded music as a purely emotional phenomenon. “My constant desire to compose music,” he wrote in the same article, “is actually the urge within me to give tonal expression to my feelings,” and he further wrote that music “must come from the heart and must be directed to the heart.”<sup>101</sup> These statements bear an uncanny resemblance to a passage from Blom's *Limitations of Music*. “The third detrimental limitation [that a composer may experience],” he wrote, “. . . is that of preconceived ideas. They are sometimes due to the influence of a school or a master and often the outcome of the composer's own theoretical

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 180–81.

<sup>100</sup> Rachmaninoff, “Music Should Speak from the Heart,” 804.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

reasoning. In either case they are apt to produce music lacking in spontaneity, because it is written as the creator thinks it ought to be rather than as a record of what he feels.”<sup>102</sup>

As a writer, Blom often demonstrated erudition and great care for his subject, not only in his *Mozart* and *Music in England*, for example, but also in his other entries in *Grove's*.<sup>103</sup> His article on Sibelius, whom he greatly admired, is newly written and features systematic discussion of the various parts of the composer's oeuvre, including a note that the composer's *Finlandia* and other shorter pieces that had attained great popularity “have become so familiar that they are liable to obscure the larger and profounder works.”<sup>104</sup> This same careful treatment is extended even to figures whose music Blom plainly acknowledges to have been largely forgotten, such as Arensky and Glazunov, the latter of whom Blom also approaches with sensitivity to the question of national influence. Although, as Blom explains, he fell “under other and cosmopolitan influences,” Glazunov maintained his link with Russian music in the “delicate and veiled realism” that animates his application of conventional forms.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Blom, *The Limitations of Music*, 157. The unfortunate irony here is that Schoenberg himself never regarded “composition with twelve tones” (as he called it) as a preconceived theory for the composition of cerebral music; composition remained for him a creative and expressive act. “I do not compose principles, but music,” he wrote to René Leibowitz in 1945. *Arnold Schoenberg: Letters*, ed. Edwin Stein, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 236. He insisted that he had always regarded his method as “a tool of composition but not as a theory” and strongly resisted its use as an analytical tool. Schoenberg, “Schoenberg's Tone-Rows,” in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 213–14. See also Schoenberg, “Compositions with Twelve Tones (1),” in *ibid.*, 223–24; and Schoenberg to Rudolf Kolisch, July 27, 1932, in *Arnold Schoenberg: Letters*, 164–65.

<sup>103</sup> See Blom, *Mozart* (London: J. M. Dent, 1935); Blom, *Music in England* (London: Pelican Books, 1942).

<sup>104</sup> *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 5th ed., s.v. “Sibelius, Jean.”

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, s.v. “Glazunov, Alexander Konstantinovich.”

We can begin to see how uncharacteristic Blom's assessment of Rachmaninoff really is for its author. Far from being newly written, the entry is essentially unchanged, save for Blom's pejorative additions, from Newmarch's original, which was appropriate in 1908 for the emerging composer-performer that Rachmaninoff then was but hardly reflected the stature that his music had attained in the repertoire by 1954. In Sibelius's case, popularity to Blom was "liable to obscure"; in Rachmaninoff's it was "notorious." Although the same appeal to broader consideration he made on behalf of Sibelius could be made for Rachmaninoff—and indeed would be in Gurlitt's *Riemann*, as we have already seen—Blom allowed the popularity of such pieces as the Prelude in C-sharp Minor and Second Concerto to dominate his characterization of their composer. Because Blom was clearly aware of the dimensions of Rachmaninoff's oeuvre, as the appended work list makes plain, this circumstance amounts to irony.

Blom's assessment is not only uncharacteristic; his criticisms of Rachmaninoff's music are also clearly inconsistent with his own published views. He asserts a composer's right to individual limitations, even "at the cost of seeming out of harmony with his time," but dismisses Rachmaninoff as one who "can hardly be said to have belonged to his time at all." He defends the "evanescent," "prettiness," "sentiment," and the unsophisticated concertgoer apt to confuse such qualities for greatness, but he dismisses Rachmaninoff's music as "artificial and gushing tunes" right along with its "enormous popular success." He challenges the fairness of an overly nationalistic critical perspective but confines Rachmaninoff to a Russian context. Even then, he aligns Rachmaninoff with Glazunov to emphasize his conventionalism but grants the latter a circuitous route back to Russianness.

Moreover, he made these criticisms without a thorough knowledge of the oeuvre. His stylistic description may approximate the lyrical themes of the Second Concerto as presented by

the piano, but it does not account for the variety of textures even in that whole work, let alone the rest of the piano music or the music for other media. Indeed, he does not name any of Rachmaninoff's songs, choral works, chamber music, or symphonic music. Given the significant differences between the Second and Third Concertos, his equation of the two works reduces them to their most general features. His work list, like his stylistic commentary, omits the Third Symphony and *Symphonic Dances*, though they had been published more than a decade before, and with them a crucial moment in the composer's stylistic development. As a result, he mischaracterizes Rachmaninoff's music just as he had mischaracterized the twelve-tone music of Schoenberg before, but without the element of curiosity with which he had approached the latter.

This analysis has been ventured in an effort to understand why Blom assessed Rachmaninoff's music as he did, but what it has revealed is that Blom's critical views do not explain the assessment. By his own logic, he should have maintained at least some modest appreciation of Rachmaninoff's music. Written without sufficient knowledge of his subject, teetering on the verge of self-contradiction, and inconsistent with his own views, Blom's assessment is the very definition of prejudice.<sup>106</sup> This being the case, its ultimate value lies not in what it reveals about Rachmaninoff's music but in what it reveals about how Blom himself regarded it: as popular gush unworthy of careful attention. Indeed, it seems it was the very popularity of the music, as opposed to the music itself, that irked Blom. Recall his comment about the "notoriously popular C-sharp Minor Prelude." Better yet, take a closer look at his statement that "the enormous popular success some few of Rachmaninoff's works had in his lifetime is not likely to last, and musicians never regarded it with much favor." At first glance,

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<sup>106</sup> "2 a (1) preconceived judgment or opinion (2) : an adverse opinion or leaning formed without just grounds or before sufficient knowledge b : an instance of such judgment or opinion c : an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race, or their supposed characteristics." *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed., s.v. "prejudice."

Blom seems here to dismiss the music, and no doubt this is what he meant, since this statement comes on the heels of another one describing the music as a monotonous hodgepodge of gushing tunes. What it actually says, however, is that what musicians never regarded with much favor was *the enormous popular success*, this being the only noun phrase to which the pronoun *it* can refer in its immediate syntactical context. With this rich Freudian slip, Blom revealed the true source of his aversion to Rachmaninoff's music. The real question that must be asked, then, is how popular success led in Rachmaninoff's case to an aversion while it did not, for example, in the case of Sibelius, as noted above. That is a question for another time.<sup>107</sup>

The final member of this English trio was Gerald Abraham. Whereas Scholes and Blom typically wrote to a general audience, Abraham's writings appeared primarily in musicological publications. He was a widely respected authority on Russian music, and his assessment of Russian music carried enormous weight throughout the West. Like other prominent Western scholars of Russian music of his time, Abraham maintained an abiding reverence for the nationalist idiom of the Mighty Handful.<sup>108</sup> In addition to writing a substantial body of scholarly works, Abraham was an active editor and collaborator for such major publications as the *Monthly Musical Record* and *The New Oxford History of Music*.<sup>109</sup> He also authored the

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<sup>107</sup> It is possible that the popular 1945 British romance *Brief Encounter*, whose score was derived almost exclusively from Rachmaninoff's Second Concerto, triggered a downturn in the composer's critical reception at mid-century. I find the film's appropriation of the concerto to be thoughtful and creative, but it certainly exploits the nostalgic element of the music, and it is easy to see how this effect would have been off-putting to persons for whom nostalgia held negative aesthetic value.

<sup>108</sup> See Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, xiv.

<sup>109</sup> *The New Oxford History of Music*, 10 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1954–90); see also, for example, Abraham, *Studies in Russian Music* (London: William Reeves, 1935); Abraham, *On Russian Music* (London: William Reeves, 1939); Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi and Abraham, *Masters of Russian Music* (London: Duckworth, 1936).

impressive *Concise Oxford History of Music*, which was translated into German and published as part of *Das grosse Lexikon der Musik* in 1983.

Abraham wrote the assessment of Rachmaninoff that appeared in 1962 in the first edition of *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, commonly referred to as *MGG*. As we noted above, this was the preeminent music encyclopedia of its time, far surpassing the fifth edition of *Grove's* in its level of scholarship and breadth of coverage. It remained unrivaled until the publication, in 1980, of *The New Grove*. Abraham's article offers a detailed summary of Rachmaninoff's life, a discussion of his works, and a bibliography and is but one of several of the author's writings that spell out his unenthusiastic view of the composer. Just as Kolodin's article represents an expansion of the prevailing sentiment of the early decades of the century, Abraham's assessment represents the most detailed expression of the English category of assessment under consideration. Unquestionably owing to the prestige of *MGG*, Abraham's article would exert a strong influence in subsequent music lexicons. For both of these reasons, it warrants fairly extensive quotation.

A progression from Scholes and Blom is evident in Abraham's sweeping declaration of Rachmaninoff's indebtedness to the piano. Scholes acknowledged Rachmaninoff's compositional skill while commending the miniatures; Blom called his technique into question and otherwise implied that he was a piano composer; Abraham reduced and attributed much of Rachmaninoff's compositional identity to his pianism per se. As elsewhere, Abraham intertwines praise and criticism of Rachmaninoff in a subtle, skillful, and almost dizzying manner:

Rachmaninoff was an excellent pianist who has emerged as a composer not only of effective piano works and song accompaniments, but whose orchestral works and even the orchestral parts of his operas seem as though they were basically conceived for the piano. He was influenced first and foremost by Liszt and Chopin, but his keyboard style was still more luxuriant than his models, so that the almost continuous richness of sonority and beautifully applied figurations of the left hand eventually tire the ear. This

superabundance of the setting perfectly suits, however, the luxuriant melancholy of which so many of his melodic ideas and his romantic but essentially diatonic harmony speak.<sup>110</sup>

Abraham then turns his attention, like Scholes and Blom, to the question of Russianness, posing Rachmaninoff's reliance on Western-European models. In his peculiar way, Abraham seems to hail Rachmaninoff as Tchaikovsky's heir but then suggests that he is inferior. He seems to celebrate the individuality of Rachmaninoff's style but then laments its limitations:

Just as Rachmaninoff as a piano-composer was the heir of Liszt and Chopin, he also claimed the spiritual heritage of Tchaikovsky and Arensky, though the feature of fatalism noticeable in most of his works is less tragic than Tchaikovsky and more resigned and elegiac, particularly in the characteristic *Isle of the Dead*. When Rachmaninoff rebels against fate, the protest seems to be more of a rhetorical type than an expression of real passion; his Weltschmerz is a little too elegant and refined. In some of his early works . . . the influences of Balakirev and Borodin are unmistakable, but little by little these recede from Rachmaninoff's works. As soon as his own style had developed with the Concerto in C Minor (1900), he was content to refine it and apply it to new forms. This "Rachmaninoff-style" is just as unmistakable as it is limited. It manifested itself in new musical forms from work to work (for example, in *Isle of the Dead*, *The Bells*, and the *Paganini Rhapsody*), while the composer's creative personality scarcely developed further. . . . Uniformity and self-repetition are apparent not only in his choice of keys, . . . [but also] in his tendency to repeat textures, thematic ideas, and even whole sections from work to work, even in the dramatic material of his operas.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> "Rachmaninow war ein ausgezeichnete Pianist, der als Komponist nicht nur mit wirkungsvollen Klavier-Werken und -Begleitungen seiner Lieder hervorgetreten ist, sondern dessen Orchester-Werke und sogar die Orchester-Partien der Opern den Eindruck machen, als seien sie im Grunde für das Klavier konzipiert. Er ist in erster Linie von Liszt und Chopin beeinflusst, doch wurde sein Klavier-Satz noch üppiger als der seiner Vorbilder, so daß das Ohr angesichts der fast ununterbrochen vorhandenen Klangfülle und der schön angelegten Figurationen der linken Hand schließlich doch ermüdet. Diese Überfülle des Satzes paßt jedoch genau zu der üppigen Melancholie, die aus so vielen seiner melodischen Einfälle und aus seiner romantischen, aber im wesentlichen diatonischen Harmonik spricht."

<sup>111</sup> "Wie Rachmaninow als Klavier-Komponist der Erbe Liszts und Chopins war, so trat er geistig das Erbe Tschaikowskys und Arenskys an, obgleich der in den meisten seiner Werke spürbare Zug von Fatalismus weniger tragisch als bei Tschaikowsky und eher resignativ und elegisch ist, so vor allem in der charakteristischen *Toteninsel*. Sobald Rachmaninow sich gegen das Schicksal auflehnt, scheint dieser Protest mehr rhetorischer Art als ein Ausdruck echter Leidenschaft zu sein; sein Weltschmerz ist ein wenig zu elegant und raffiniert. In einigen seiner Frühwerke . . . sind Einflüsse von Balakirew und Borodin nicht zu verkennen, doch gehen sie im Schaffen Rachmaninows nach und nach zurück. Sobald dieser mit dem Klavier-Konzert *c* (1900) seinen eigenen Stil entwickelt hatte, gab er sich damit zufrieden, ihn zu verfeinern und auf neue

Abraham thus regarded Rachmaninoff much as Scholes and Blom did. The composer's style was thought to be insufficiently well-defined and to depend too much on the piano. Abraham's assessment carried more weight, however, not only because he specialized in Russian music but also because he clearly possessed a detailed familiarity with Rachmaninoff's music. Owing to the detail with which Abraham described his views in the foregoing assessment, it is not necessary to dwell extensively on them here. All of his other statements on Rachmaninoff convey more or less the same impressions but merely in fewer words. His passing comment in his *One Hundred Years of Music* is representative. There he states that Rachmaninoff was an epigone of Tchaikovsky, one in a group of second-generation nationalists that tried "to establish themselves as universalists. That would matter less," he continued, "if they were something more than talented mediocrities. But it would be stupid to pretend that Glazunov, Lyadov, Rachmaninoff and Arensky . . . are anything but pale shadows of their masters and predecessors."<sup>112</sup>

The assessments of Scholes, Blom, and Abraham give form to John Culshaw's description of Rachmaninoff's antipathetic reception among the British musical elite in the years immediately following World War II. "Having been passionately fond of Rachmaninov's music" since his early teens, Culshaw continued nurturing his love for the music during his military service. While in training, he and his fellow cadets would gather in the airfield cinema to listen

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Formen anzuwenden. Dieser „Rachmaninows-Stil“ ist ebenso unverwechselbar wie begrenzt. Er entwickelt von Werk zu Werk (z. B. in der *Toteninsel*, in den *Glocken* und in der *Paganini-Rhapsodie*) neue Spielformen seiner selbst, während die künstlerische Persönlichkeit des Komponist sich kaum weiterentwickelte. . . . Die Gleichförmigkeit und Selbstwiederholung zeigt sich nicht nur in der Wahl der Tonarten . . . [sondern auch] in seiner Neigung, Fakturen, thematische Einfälle und sogar ganze Abschnitte von Werk zu Werk zu wiederholen, selbst in seinen Opernstoffen.”

<sup>112</sup> Abraham, *One Hundred Years of Music: After Beethoven and Wagner*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Aldine, 1964).

to records, and Rachmaninoff would fill the hall. “There was something in his music that touched a nerve in that generation at that time,” Culshaw later recalled, “and I wanted to know why, and to find out more about the man and the music.” After returning from the war, Culshaw wrote a survey of Rachmaninoff’s works, which was, in fact, the first complete posthumous survey of Rachmaninoff’s music to be published anywhere.<sup>113</sup> He discovered while writing the book, however, that “in academic circles his [i.e., Rachmaninoff’s] music was regarded with contempt”:<sup>114</sup>

It proved highly undesirable even to mention the name of Rachmaninoff in London musical circles in 1946, let alone admit that one was trying to write a book about him. . . .

The writing of the book became a sort of clandestine operation. Valuable scores and sometimes manuscripts turned up in the most unlikely places, as if people were slightly ashamed of harboring such unworthy efforts.<sup>115</sup>

Describing this same setting on a later occasion, Culshaw wrote that

the prevailing “professional” attitude to Rachmaninoff’s music was that it was hopelessly outdated. . . . Our attitude was discounted by our superiors; when I tried to explain to an Oxford professor the enthusiasm that had been aroused by the playing of Ormandy’s Minneapolis recording of Rachmaninov’s Second Symphony in the airfield cinema in Trinidad in 1943, his response was that it was “nothing but nostalgia.”<sup>116</sup>

Culshaw “could not see . . . what could possibly arouse nostalgia in cadets with an average age of nineteen.”<sup>117</sup> Nevertheless, the influence of these musical superiors—figures such as Scholes,

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<sup>113</sup> John Culshaw, *Putting the Record Straight* (New York: Viking, 1982), 25, 32, 61. See Culshaw, *Sergei Rachmaninov* (London: Dobson, 1949).

<sup>114</sup> Culshaw, “Rachmaninov Revisited,” *Soundings* 3 (January 1973): 2.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 2–3.

<sup>116</sup> Culshaw, *Putting the Record Straight*, 76. Culshaw’s suggestion that Rachmaninoff’s music was regarded as “outdated” (nostalgia being part of this), and that this was the primary reason for its low critical regard, may well be true—we have no reason to discount his testimony—but if so, this sentiment was not expressed in any music lexicons of the period, as we have seen.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

Blom, and Abraham<sup>118</sup>—ran deep. Although he was a self-described Rachmaninoff “enthusiast,” Culshaw later admitted that “some of the prevailing antipathy to Rachmaninoff had had an influence on me. . . . I had not set out to write uncritical gush, but I had no intention of being destructive; yet it seems to me now that the book managed to achieve both of those dubious objectives.”<sup>119</sup>

With the cumulative weight of their successive assessments—each combining advantageously the acknowledged authority of its author with the prominence and permanence of the lexicon in which it appeared—Scholes, Blom, and Abraham established a new, negative line of lexicographical assessment for Rachmaninoff; as we have seen, these are not the only assessments in music lexicons of the period to mingle praise and criticism of Rachmaninoff’s music, but they are the only ones in which criticism extends to dismissal. Their assessments appeared in the most widely circulated and authoritative music lexicons of the mid-twentieth century: *The Oxford Companion* became one of the most popular concise music encyclopedias ever, *Grove’s* enjoyed an even broader readership and remained in print for twenty-five years, and *MGG* was, at the same time, the unrivaled scholarly music encyclopedia of its day. The visibility and weight of these assessments must not, however, obscure the fact that they were vastly outnumbered at the time of their publication and thus represent a minority view. Scholes stood alone as Rachmaninoff’s sole detractor in music lexicons from 1938 until 1954, when he was joined by Blom. These were joined in turn by Abraham in 1962, but the 1960s were also

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<sup>118</sup> Culshaw, in fact, knew Abraham, and it is highly likely that he was familiar with the writings of Scholes and Blom as well, for he indicates that during these same postwar years he “continued to read just about every music book I could find, not just in the local library but in the specialist collections in Liverpool and Manchester.” *Ibid.*, 49–51.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 76–77.

characterized by widespread approbation for Rachmaninoff in music lexicons. Abraham's influence in particular would eventually show itself in other lexicons, but not until the 1970s.

Among the lexicons surveyed, Abraham's article in *MGG* was, in fact, one of only three negative assessments to appear in the 1960s. The other two appeared within a few years of Abraham's and were likewise published in continental Europe. The first was written by Horst Seeger, a German musicologist, critic, and lexicographer active in the German Democratic Republic. His 1966 *Musiklexikon* gives the composer short shrift: "Rachmaninoff was one of the greatest pianists of his era. . . . As a composer he was able to succeed with only a few works that were influenced by Tchaikovsky."<sup>120</sup> The second, written by Dutch pianist and composer Alex de Vries, is more extended and appeared in 1963 in the large *Algemene muziek-encyclopedie*. De Vries's stylistic commentary opens by aligning Rachmaninoff with "the more West-leaning Moscow School" in late-nineteenth-century Russian music.<sup>121</sup> On the question of Rachmaninoff's stylistic contemporaneity, he takes a negative stance, expressed in terms that reflect De Vries's avid interest in psychology:<sup>122</sup>

Considered psychologically, he was a typical secondary-reactionary, by nature not very open to new impressions. Creatively, he seldom or never outgrew a surely very talented epigonism; he is and remains a Tchaikovsky admirer. The message of renewal brought by Musorgsky—born 39 years before him—passed by him; the evolution of Scriabin, his

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<sup>120</sup> "Rachmaninow war einer der bedeutendsten Pianisten seiner Epoche. . . . Als Komponist vermochte er sich nur mit einigen Werken, die im Bannkreise Tschaikowskis stehen, durchzusetzen."

<sup>121</sup> "Rachmaninoff vertegenwoordigde de meer bij het Westen aanleunende Moskou-richting."

<sup>122</sup> See Alex de Vries, *Inleiding tot de algemene en muzikale geheugenleer* [Introduction to the theory of general and musical memory] (Leuven, Belgium: De Monte, 1973). Biographical information for De Vries can be found at "De Vries, Alex," Studiecentrum voor Vlaamse Muziek vzw, accessed December 4, 2014, <http://www.svm.be/content/de-vries-alex?display=biography&language=en>.

contemporary, was foreign to him, to say nothing of Stravinsky, who was but nine years younger.<sup>123</sup>

In matters of technique, De Vries regarded Rachmaninoff as a talented melodist who wrote brilliantly for the piano but failed to reconcile these virtues with the demands of form:

Rachmaninoff's principal quality is melodic wealth. His indisputable talent as a melodist is evident already from the first theme of his Piano Concerto No. 1 in F-sharp Minor, op. 1, and perhaps even more clearly from the main theme of his Third Piano Concerto in D Minor. The endless "passage-play" that follows the exposition of this gorgeous theme, however, betrays at the same time the limits of his talent and an eminently deficient structure.

In some privileged moments he reaches higher summits—among others, in the *Paganini Rhapsody*—and in any event Rachmaninoff's oeuvre remains a monument of ingenious, grandly conceived, and richly varied pianistic writing.<sup>124</sup>

Like Blom, De Vries omitted some significant works from the work list, in this case the composer's first opera, *Aleko*, and his final symphonic work, the *Symphonic Dances*.

The 1970s witnessed the highest concentration of negative lexicographical assessments of Rachmaninoff, although these continued to be far outnumbered by neutral and favorable assessments. His treatment in Italian lexicons suffered an especially noteworthy decline—the assessment that appeared in 1971 in *La musica*, which abstains from descriptive commentary, is the exception among these. A new edition of the *Enciclopedia della musica* features a negative

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<sup>123</sup> "Psychologisch beschouwd, was hij een typisch secundair-reagerende, weinig voor nieuwe indrukken openstaande natuur. Creatief is hij zelden of nooit boven een overigens zeer begaafd epigonisme uitgegroeid; hij is en blijft een Tsjaikofski-bewonderaar. De boodschap van vernieuwing, gebracht door Moessorgski — 39 jaar vóór hem geboren — is hem voorbijgegaan; de evolutie van Skrjabin, zijn tijdgenoot, bleef hem vreemd, om te zwijgen van de maar negen jaar jongere Stravinski."

<sup>124</sup> "De voornaamste kwaliteit van Rachmaninoff is de melodische rijkdom. Zijn onbetwistbare gave als melodicus blijkt reeds uit het eerste thema van het pianoconcerto Nr. 1, Op. 1, in fis, en nog duidelijker wellicht uit het hoofdthema van zijn 3e pianoconcerto, in d. Het eindeloze „passage-spel" dat echter op de expositie van dit prachtige thema volgt, verraadt tevens de beperking van zijn talent en een bij uitstek gebrekkige constructie.

"In sommige geprivilegieerde momenten bereikt hij hogere toppen—onder anderen in de *Paganini-rapsodie*—en in ieder geval blijft het oeuvre van Rachmaninoff een monument van een vernuftige, groots opgezette en rijk gedifferentieerde pianistische schrijfwijze."

assessment that accords Rachmaninoff little respect as a composer, and that strongly qualified. The assessment appeared in 1972 and was written by Piero Rattalino, who would emerge as one of Italy's most prominent music critics and has written many books on the piano and its lauded performers. Like Rachmaninoff's English detractors, Rattalino emphasizes the composer's Moscow heritage in a negative light. Unlike them, however, he applies an overtly modernist paradigm that links "historical importance" with musical progressivism:

Rachmaninoff's work as a composer is rather less significant [than as an interpreter]. In his early piano works, Rachmaninoff was harmed less by the evident derivation from the Tchaikovsky matrix as he was by the influence of A. S. Arensky, which manifests itself in trite sentimentalism and in the frequent banality of the melody. Later, particularly during the Dresden period, Rachmaninoff's melody lost the sentimental attitude typical of the *fin de siècle* and became at times very original. The number of compositions, however, does not correspond to a continuity of stimuli and creative invention, and often the superbly pianistic writing does not redeem the impersonal materials and academic forms. . . .

Rachmaninoff's indifference to the major creators among his contemporaries and immediate predecessors . . . limits his historical importance and makes him worthy to be remembered at the very most for a few happy moments in the first two symphonies and *Kolokola* [*The Bells*].<sup>125</sup>

An assessment published in 1974 in the *Enciclopedia della Garzanti della musica* likewise aligns Rachmaninoff with Moscow's "cosmopolitan-style eclecticism" (eclettismo stilistico cosmopolitico), also chiding him for "a certain bombast and inclination, especially in the piano concertos, toward a wholly superficial virtuosity" (una certa ampollosità e inclinazione, specie i

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<sup>125</sup> "Minore è invece la portata dell'opera di Rachmaninov come compositore. Nei suoi lavori giovanili per pianoforte, l'evidente derivazione dalla matrice ciakovskiana non nuoce a Rachmaninov quanto gli nuoce invece l'influenza di A. S. Arenski, che si manifesta nel trito sentimentalismo e nella frequente banalità della melodia. Più tardi, specie nel periodo di Dresda, la melodia di Rachmaninov perse i caratteri sentimentali tipici della fine del secolo, e divenne talvolta molto originale. Il numero delle composizioni non corrisponde però ad una continuità di stimoli e di invenzione creativa, e spesso la superba scrittura pianistica non riscatta i materiali impersonali e le forme accademiche. . . .

"L'indifferenza di Rachmaninov verso i maggiori creatori che immediatamente lo precedono e che gli sono coetanei . . . limita la sua importanza storica e lo fa tutt'al più ricordare per alcuni felici momenti delle prime due sinfonie e di *Kolokolá*."

concerti per pianoforte, a un virtuosismo tutto esteriore). The 1976 *Nuovo Dizionario Ricordi della musica e dei musicisti* still accords Rachmaninoff “inventive genius and solid craftsmanship,” but he is now “prone to superficiality” (anche se spesso incline all’esteriorità).

Other less favorable assessments of the 1970s appear to have been directly influenced by Abraham’s assessment in *MGG*, much as Bantock’s assessment in the trusted *Dictionary of Modern Music and Musicians* had influenced others decades earlier. This time, however, the influence was negative rather than positive. The 1974 *Dictionary of Contemporary Music* echoes Abraham’s criticism of Rachmaninoff’s compositional technique in a rare departure from the composer’s typically favorable treatment in American music lexicons. “He was one of the great piano virtuosos of his time,” the entry reads, “and the piano is at the heart of his compositions. His songs depend very much on their accompaniments, and the texture of his orchestral music is often pianistic in origin.” The second edition of the Yugoslavian *Muzicka enciklopedija* reproduces Hajek’s original article, save for an inserted statement, reproduced below, that was obviously borrowed from *MGG*. The now jarringly conflicted assessment probably represents editorial interference, since Hajek died in 1974 and this volume was published in 1977:

Primarily a composer of pianistic inspiration, in his piano music Rachmaninoff follows Chopin and Liszt, but his keyboard texture is denser almost to the point of saturation, as, for example, in the extravagant assortment of appealing figuration in the left hand. In some of his early works . . . one perceives the influences of Balakirev and Borodin, but they later disappear completely. By about 1900 Rachmaninoff’s personality as a creator was completely developed. Rachmaninoff’s particular style neither changes significantly nor develops further, and in later works often leads to monotonous self-repetition.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> “Kompozitor primarno pijanističke inspiracije, Rahmanjinov u svojoj klavirskoj muzici sledi Chopina i Liszta ali mu je klavirska faktura zgusnutija gotovo zasićena, npr. preteranim redanjem dopadljive figuracije u levoj ruci. U pojedinim njegovim ranim delima . . . opažaju se i uticaji Balakireva i Borodina, ali oni posle sasvim nestaju. Oko 1900 Rahmanjinov je kao stvaralac potpuno izgrađena ličnost. Specifičan stil Rahmanjinova posle se nije bitno menjao ni dalje razvijao pa u kasnijim delima često dolazi do jednoličnog ponavljanja vlastitih postupaka.”

Likewise, the assessment that appeared in 1979 in the *Brockhaus Riemann Musiklexikon* displays more sympathy with *MGG* than with the *Riemann* that preceded it: “Rachmaninoff’s often overladen style,” it reads, “is influenced by Liszt, Chopin, and Tchaikovsky; his musical language stands occasionally in the vicinity of salon music.”<sup>127</sup>

Other assessments from this period show Abraham’s influence not by adopting his negative tone but by naming, like the *Brockhaus Riemann*, Chopin, Liszt, and Tchaikovsky as Rachmaninoff’s principal musical influences—a new stylistic configuration. These include the assessments in Theodore Karp’s 1973 *Dictionary of Music* and *Das grosse Lexikon der Musik in acht Bänden*.

A fair terminating point for this period of marked regional variation is 1983. That year De Vries’s assessment was carried into a new edition of the *Algemene muziek encyclopedie*, with its final two paragraphs struck. This change—editorial, since De Vries died in 1964—is ambivalent: it removes almost all of De Vries’s favorable commentary but also his criticism of Rachmaninoff’s formal technique. The work list remains incomplete, as in the original, which was curious before but even more so by 1983.

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<sup>127</sup> “Rachmaninows oft überladener Stil ist von Liszt, Chopin und Tschaikowsky beeinflusst; seine Musiksprache steht gelegentlich in der Nähe der Salonmusik.”

### Chapter 3

#### 1980–2013: A New Consensus

By the time De Vries's modified assessment appeared in 1983, a return to a favorable international consensus was already under way. Culminating in the early twenty-first century, this would be a new consensus, one based on a familiarity with Rachmaninoff's music that far exceeded the level evident in assessments up to 1938. In places where the composer's reception in music lexicons had declined, assessments were rewritten or edited from older editions to present him in a more positive light. Whereas the two most prominent music lexicons of the mid-twentieth century, *Grove's* and *MGG*, had featured negative assessments, by the end of this period these and other, comparable encyclopedic works would all feature detailed, balanced, and affirmative ones. While his reputation as a pianist had not faded, Rachmaninoff was widely viewed once again as a skilled, multifaceted composer, and his enduring prominence in the spheres of Russian music and twentieth-century music was universally acknowledged in music lexicons.

Ironically, this return first emerged in England in the 1970s, when the decline in Rachmaninoff's reception in music lexicons that English writers themselves had initiated was at its peak. Driving this reevaluation in music lexicons was a younger generation of musicians who, as Culshaw explained, "found no embarrassment in embracing the work of a composer whose style was out of step with his period."<sup>1</sup> The articles of Richard Coolidge and Stephen Walsh that were cited in the introduction were also part of this broader reevaluation of the composer in England at this time. The first definite trace of this development in music lexicography is found in Jack Westrup's 1971 edition of *Everyman's*, where the word "notoriously" has been struck

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<sup>1</sup> Culshaw, *Putting the Record Straight*, 77.

from Blom's original description of the Prelude in C-sharp Minor; the entry also appears thus in the subsequent and final edition of this title, the 1988 *New Everyman Dictionary of Music*.<sup>2</sup> Reassessment of the composer is also evident in the 1971 *Larousse Encyclopedia of Music* (an English edition of *La musique*—see p. 61), in which the original French assessment has been modified to read that “his music is moving and has been criticized for occasional excessive romanticism, but it is always sincere and sensitive, and his later works are coming to be more and more admired.”<sup>3</sup> Rachmaninoff's late works are also the focal point of the new assessment that appears in Conrad Wilson's 1976 edition of the *New College Encyclopedia of Music*, where the dismissive stance of the previous English generation was contested directly in an act of open revisionism:

At one time it was fashionable to disparage Rachmaninoff as a romantic born out of his period, to condemn many of his large-scale works because of their “structural weaknesses,” and to claim that his inspiration dwindled as he grew older. But now that his music has come more fully into focus, it is easy to refute these accusations. . . . His romanticism was an asset rather than a liability, and in any case irrelevant to works like the Third Piano Concerto and the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*—finely integrated scores, in which style and content are perfectly suited to each other. As for the loss of inspiration, one need only point out that one of his most progressive and compelling works, the *Symphonic Dances* for orchestra, dates from the very end of his career.

Within a few short years, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, *The Oxford Companion*, and *The New Grove* all regrouped in Rachmaninoff's favor. The late Michael Kennedy's substantially revised third edition of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, published in 1980, featured a new assessment that has been reprinted up to the present day in all five subsequent editions of

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<sup>2</sup> It is probable that David Cummings, editor of *The New Everyman*, also carried the entry in this form into two subsequent music lexicons that he edited, *The Hutchinson Encyclopedia of Music* (1995) and its American edition, *The Random House Encyclopedic Dictionary of Music* (1997), but I have not examined these.

<sup>3</sup> *Larousse Encyclopedia of Music*, ed. Geoffrey Hindley (London: Hamlyn, 1971; reprint, New York: Excalibur Books, 1981), 425.

it and its twin title, *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*.<sup>4</sup> The assessment acknowledges Rachmaninoff's excellence as a performer but emphasizes his legacy as a composer, just as it acknowledges his piano music but emphasizes his works in other genres. It also celebrates the composer's relation to his nineteenth-century predecessors as one of heritage rather than of epigonism. In other words, it inverts the view of the earlier, dissenting English commentators:

Rachmaninoff was one of the greatest of pianists, as is proved by his recordings not only of his own concertos but of other composers' music. . . . The vigor and attention to detail of his conducting are also preserved on records. But it is as a composer that his name will live longest. He was the last of the colorful Russian masters of the late-nineteenth century, with their characteristic gift for long and broad melodies imbued with a resigned melancholy which is never long absent. His operas have failed to hold the stage, mainly because of defects in their librettos, but recordings have enabled their splendid music to be appreciated. Three of the four piano concertos are an ineradicable part of the romantic repertory, and the symphonies, though long overshadowed by the pianoforte works, have gained esteem and popularity. The songs are at last being recognized as among Russia's best. In his later years his style grew subtler. . . . But his masterpiece is *The Bells*, in which all his powers are fused and unified.

Rachmaninoff's most important advocate among this younger generation of British musicians was Geoffrey Norris, who worked simultaneously in the spheres of biography, documentary history, music lexicography, and music criticism to project a more well-rounded and sympathetic image of the composer.<sup>5</sup> Norris wrote the much enhanced article in *The New Oxford Companion to Music*, published in 1983, which has been carried into all subsequent editions of that title, including *Oxford Music Online*. More significantly, drawing on the experience of his research on the composer, Norris wrote a new article for the 1980 *New Grove*

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<sup>4</sup> The commentary from this assessment reproduced here includes two minor editorial changes introduced after the first edition and retained up to the present. The phrase "three of the four piano concertos" originally read "the four piano concertos," and the comment about the symphonies originally read "gained in popularity."

<sup>5</sup> See Geoffrey Norris, "Rakhmaninov's Second Thoughts," *Musical Times* 114 (April 1973): 364–68; Norris, "Rakhmaninov's Student Opera," *Musical Quarterly* 59 (July 1973): 441–48; Norris, *Rakhmaninov* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1976; 2nd ed. pub. 1994 as *Rachmaninoff*). Norris has also written variously on other Russian composers.

to supersede the composite entry by Newmarch and Blom. The article, which far exceeded the length and detail of coverage of any previous entry on Rachmaninoff in a music lexicon, was retained with slight emendations in the second edition of *The New Grove* in 2001, is cited repeatedly in the current English-language article on Rachmaninoff in *Wikipedia*, and has also appeared in titles derived from *The New Grove*.<sup>6</sup> Like those of Wilson and Kennedy, Norris's assessment reads like a corrective to Scholes, Blom, and Abraham. Norris opens by placing Rachmaninoff firmly in the pantheon of Russian composers, without any reference to abstracted notions of stylistic contemporaneity:

He was one of the finest pianists of his day and, as a composer, the last great representative of Russian late romanticism. The influences of Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and other Russian composers soon gave way to a thoroughly personal idiom, with a pronounced lyrical quality, expressive breadth, structural ingenuity, and a palette of rich, distinctive orchestral colors.

Norris discusses the composer's output and stylistic development with subtlety and discernment. In the process, he acknowledges the piano's importance in Rachmaninoff's career and output but emphasizes his well-roundedness as a composer, noting his achievements in various genres and in many aspects of compositional technique, such as melodic inventiveness, formal structure, and orchestration, among others. The following is but an excerpt of Norris's extensive commentary, but it serves to illustrate the care and expertise with which he approaches his subject:

Understandably, the piano figures prominently in Rachmaninoff's music, either as a solo instrument or as part of an ensemble. But he used his own skills as a performer not to write music of unreasonable, empty virtuosity, but rather to explore fully the expressive possibilities of the instrument. Even in his earliest works . . . he revealed a sure grasp of idiomatic piano writing and a striking gift for melody. . . .

With his works of the mid-1890s Rachmaninoff began to strike a more individual tone: the six *Moments musicaux* (1896) have the characteristic yearning themes, combined with a rise and fall of dynamics and intricate passagework. Even his First

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<sup>6</sup> See Norris, "Sergey Rakhmaninov," in *The New Grove Russian Masters 2*, 1st American ed., ed. Gerald Abraham (New York: Norton, 1986), 75–105; and the assessments in *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music* (1986) and *The Grove Dictionary of American Music* (2013).

Symphony (1895) . . . has many original features. Its brutal gestures and uncompromising power of expression (particularly in the finale) were unprecedented in Russian music; and, although it must be said that the work has a tendency to ramble, nevertheless its flexible rhythms, sweeping lyricism, and stringent economy of thematic material . . . were features used with greater subtlety and individuality later on.

After the three vacuous years that followed the poor reception of the symphony in 1897, Rachmaninoff's style began to develop significantly. In the Second Piano Concerto (1900–01) the headstrong youthful impetuosity of the symphony has largely given way to Rachmaninoff's predilection for sumptuous harmonies and broadly lyrical, often intensely passionate melodies. At its most inspired, Rachmaninoff's lyrical inspiration is matchless. Taking only a few examples from many possible others, the long opening theme of the Second Concerto, the broad melodic expanse of the Second Symphony's slow movement, or the central section of *The Isle of the Dead* all demonstrate an ability to imagine seamless lines stretching ever onwards to their ultimate goal. . . .

The years immediately following the premieres of the two operas [1906–17] . . . were Rachmaninoff's most fruitful as a composer, and it was during this period that his style reached full maturity. The Second Symphony (1906–7) and Third Piano Concerto (1909) display his fully-fledged melodic style (particularly in the slow movement of the symphony), his opulent but infinitely varied and discerning use of the orchestra (notably in the symphony's scherzo), and a greater confidence in the handling of large-scale structures.

If this commentary focuses primarily on Rachmaninoff's larger works, Norris also reserves favorable comment for the composer's shorter pieces. Beginning with his opus 21 songs, Norris wrote, Rachmaninoff "began to achieve a perfect balance between voice and accompaniment, using the piano to echo the sentiments of the text." The piano preludes, he wrote further, "all have a common characteristic in that they demonstrate Rachmaninoff's ability to crystallize perfectly a particular mood or sentiment: each prelude grows from a tiny melodic or rhythmic fragment into a taut, powerfully evocative miniature."

All subsequent noteworthy British music lexicons to date likewise feature favorable assessments of Rachmaninoff.<sup>7</sup> Among these, the lengthy assessment in Norman Lebrecht's

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<sup>7</sup> See assessments in Paul Griffiths, *The Thames and Hudson Encyclopaedia of 20th-Century Music* (1986), later expanded in Griffiths, *The New Penguin Dictionary of Music*, (2006); David Pickering, *Brewer's Twentieth-century Music* (1994), revised and published as *The Cassell Companion to 20th-century Music* (1997); *The Norton/Grove Concise Encyclopedia of Music* (1988); *Encyclopedia of Music in the 20th Century* (1999).

1992 *Companion to 20th-Century Music*, carried into the second edition in 2000, might be mentioned, for it displays the renewed English favorability in a specifically twentieth-century context. Lebrecht refers to the Second Concerto as “great art,” to the Third as “the most confident and accomplished of his concerted works,” and to Rachmaninoff himself as “inextricably Russian.” Also consistent with English reappraisal is Lebrecht’s acknowledgement of Rachmaninoff’s late works: the Fourth Concerto (Blom’s “failure from the start”) was simply “too perplexing for its American audience,” and the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* contains the composer’s “most sumptuous tune” and would be “the last of Rachmaninoff’s works to vanish.” Lebrecht sought not only to affirm the music per se but also to rescue Rachmaninoff from his own popularity:

The scope of his ambitions alone confirms that Rachmaninoff was not a composer who pandered to public taste, any more than Mozart was. Nor was he an empty-minded musician who chased from one stage to the next in pursuit of the highest dollar. He was a reflective man who thirsted after new ideas, relished the company of intellectuals and held a liberal humanist outlook. Much misunderstood, he belonged to the fraternity of pre-war idealists who believed that music could make a better world.

It should be noted that not everyone who participated in this British reassessment of Rachmaninoff belonged to the younger generation. The late Robert Threlfall, for example, had been studying the composer’s music since the 1930s and wrote, like Norris, an article on Rachmaninoff’s revisions and a biography of the composer during the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> Together, in 1982, Norris and Threlfall published *A Catalogue of the Compositions of S. Rachmaninoff*, an essential reference for the Rachmaninoff scholar, establishing a direct historical link between these

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<sup>8</sup> See Robert Threlfall, “Rachmaninoff’s Revisions and an Unknown Version of His Fourth Concerto,” *Musical Opinion* 96 (February 1973): 235–37; Threlfall, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: His Life and Music* (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1973).

different generations of British Rachmaninoff enthusiasts.<sup>9</sup> That Threlfall had been there all along is an important reminder of what we observed above: that the views of Scholes, Blom, and Abraham, were never universally shared, even among English commentators. Recall in this context that subsequent editions published during this period of *The Concise Encyclopedia of Music and Musicians* and Jacobs's *New Dictionary of Music* featured their original benign assessments from 1958—no reassessment in these cases was deemed necessary.

In a similar fashion, critical opinion in music lexicons softened also in Italy. As in England, the beginnings of this trend were modest: in the 1983 *La nuova enciclopedia Garzanti della musica*, the virtuosity of Rachmaninoff's music is no longer "wholly" superficial, even if the music itself still suffers from "bombast." Also as in England, reassessment soon manifested itself in a major encyclopedic work, in this case the *Dizionario enciclopedico universale della musica e dei musicisti*. Published in thirteen volumes from 1983 to 1990, the *Dizionario enciclopedico* is one of the largest music lexicons of the twentieth century, and the fact that it features a more favorable (though not uncritical) assessment of the composer is significant. The assessment appeared in 1988 and was written by Bruno Cerchio, a composer and a scholar of music and philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

Cerchio's assessment opens, however, with criticism of Rachmaninoff's formal technique. Having quoted from some of the composer's own commentary describing music as something primarily emotional rather than intellectual (some of which is reproduced above on p.

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<sup>9</sup> See Norris and Threlfall, *A Catalogue of the Compositions of S. Rachmaninoff* (London: Scolar Press, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Cerchio's *Il suono filosofale: musica e alchimia* (Lucca, Italy: Libreria musicale italiana, 1993). Cerchio's *Krishna Suite* was given its world premiere in 1992 by the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

84), Cerchio avers that the composer “was always indifferent to (or wary of) any linguistic innovation thought to be ‘cerebral,’” continuing as follows:

. . . It is therefore understandable that his real weak point was always form, which is the most intellectual (“cerebral”) aspect of composition. . . . The classic forms are passively accepted as containers in which to pour his typical desire to sing. It goes without saying, then, that his weakest compositions are the three symphonies, where length and diffuseness may erroneously suggest a Brucknerian ancestry: in Bruckner, sonata form is expanded according to a conscious plan that is completely missing in Rachmaninoff, whose verbosity is only lack of measurement.<sup>11</sup>

This criticism is but a prelude to thoughtful praise that at once reverses and transcends several criticisms ventured in Italian music lexicons of the 1970s. “These defects are mitigated, however,” Cerchio continues, “by such qualities as a genuine harmonic sensibility, a personal and unmistakable melodic vein, and an orchestral color that reveals its excellent relationship with the Russian national school.”<sup>12</sup> Cerchio also ventures a levelheaded assessment of the differing ways in which Rachmaninoff has been regarded by audiences and music professionals:

Judgments of Rachmaninoff have been divided and lacking in composure. The concert-going public (above all American) made of him one of its favorites, rightly seeing in him the last great romantic pianist-composer and bestowing an understandable preference for his Piano Concertos, above all the Second and Third. Musicians, on the other hand, considered Rachmaninoff a holdover from the past who was just as bothersome as he was famous. The truth is probably (as always) in between. The public undoubtedly admires

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<sup>11</sup> “Egli fu sempre indifferente (o diffidente) verso ogni innovazione linguistica che bollava come «cerebrale». . . . Da ciò si comprende come il suo vero punto debole sia sempre stata la forma, cioè l’aspetto più intellettuale («cerebrale») della composizione. . . . Le forme classiche vengono supinamente accettate come «contenitori» in cui riversare il proprio desiderio di canto. È ovvio quindi che le sue composizioni più deboli siano le 3 sinfonie, dove lunghezza e dispersività potrebbero erroneamente far pensare ad ascendenze bruckneriane: in Bruckner vi è un cosciente piano di dilatazione della forma-sonata che manca completamente in Rachmaninov, la cui verbosità è solo mancanza di misura.”

<sup>12</sup> “Questi difetti sono però mitigati da pregi quali una genuina sensibilità armonica, una vena melodica personale e inconfondibile, un colore orchestrale che rivela la sua ottima parentela con la scuola nazionale russa.”

Rachmaninoff's more superficial qualities, but the potency of his musical personality is undeniable.<sup>13</sup>

The rest of Cerchio's assessment proceeds on the premise that Rachmaninoff's critical reception has been complicated by his excellence as a pianist.<sup>14</sup> This perspective not only yields favorable comment on once neglected corners of Rachmaninoff's output such as his choral music, choral symphony (*The Bells*), and post-emigration works, but it also leads him to a unique calculation of the composer's historical importance (the very thing denied him earlier by Rattalino) based on the most neglected genre in Rachmaninoff's output of all—opera:

In his opera *The Miserly Knight* . . . the dark geometry of Pushkin's passions is rendered with such a density of accents as to make it the ideal path between Musorgsky and Strauss's *Elektra*, constituting on the other hand the most valid antecedent of Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*, with which it shares the contrast between the small number of characters on stage, no choir, and extremely thick and dense orchestral sonorities.<sup>15</sup>

This attitude of reappraisal is evident also in one of the most popular Italian general music dictionaries of recent years, Piero Mioli's 2006 *Dizionario di musica classica*. Mioli opens with a dispassionate description of Rachmaninoff's style, mentioning his proclivity for classic

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<sup>13</sup> “I giudizi su Rachmaninov sono stati contrastati e privi di serenità. Il pubblico concertistico (soprattutto americano) ne fece uno dei suoi beniamini, vedendo giustamente in lui l'ultimo grande pianista-compositore romantico e tributando una comprensibile preferenza ai suoi Concerti per pianoforte e orchestra, soprattutto al Secondo e al Terzo. I musicisti d'altro canto considerarono Rachmaninov come un sopravvissuto, particolarmente fastidioso in quanto famoso. È probabile che (come sempre) la verità stia in mezzo. Il pubblico ammirò indubbiamente in Rachmaninov le qualità più esteriori, ma non gli si può negare una potente personalità.”

<sup>14</sup> “As in the case of Liszt, his career as a pianist has harmed knowledge of parts of his oeuvre in which his best works are found.” (Come nel caso di Liszt la carriera di pianista nocque alla conoscenza di parti della sua produzione in cui è forse dato trovare le sue cose migliori.)

<sup>15</sup> Nell'opera *Il cavaliere avaro* . . . la cupa geometria delle passioni puskiniana è resa con tale densità di accenti da farne il tramite ideale tra Musorgskij e l'*Elektra* straussiana, costituendo per altro verso il più valido antecedente del bartokiano *Castello di Barbablù*, con cui condivide il contrasto tra numero esiguo di personaggi in scena, assenza di coro e sonorità orchestrali oltremodo spesse e massicce.”

forms, romantic idiom, “keen harmonic sensibility,” and “great skill in orchestration.” He also praises Rachmaninoff as “an outstanding melodist,” though his description of Rachmaninoff’s melodies is mixed: they are “often inspired and captivating” but also (perhaps echoing *Garzanti*) “sometimes grandiloquent and a bit superficial.”<sup>16</sup> This introductory commentary gives way to a validating statement positing Rachmaninoff’s close relation to the romantic and post-romantic currents of his time. As with many other reappraisals, this one makes special reference to segments of Rachmaninoff’s oeuvre that were initially overshadowed by his more famous works:

With Richard Strauss and Sibelius, Rachmaninoff was truly the last of the romantics, a blessed survivor who had the courage of his convictions and, on the part of certain critics wholly bent on the merciless liquidation of the past, has met with far too much mistrust. All the more so, since in his last years in his native country he had made somewhat of a reversal that on closer inspection prevents his total identification with the style of the nineteenth century. This concerns such music as the cantata *Kolokola* [*The Bells*] set to text by Edgar Allan Poe, the collections of romances set to verses by symbolist poets, and the *Études-tableaux*, where an irregularity and a boldness of writing are accompanied by a tragic, grotesque mode of expression much closer to Mahler and Schoenberg than to Tchaikovsky and Brahms: an authentic break from the aspiration to an absolute classic-romantic beauty that he sought in other earlier and later works that were more well-known and performed in the American period.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> “Affrontò quasi tutti i generi e le forme classiche; fece uso di un linguaggio assolutamente romantico, cioè forte, sostenuto, patetico e comunicativo; alla viva sensibilità armonica aggiunse una grande bravura di orchestratore (sull’esempio di Rimskij-Korsakov); e brillò nell’invenzione melodica, stagliando temi spesso felici e accattivanti ma talvolta enfatici e un po’ superficiali.”

<sup>17</sup> “Con Strauss e Sibelius Rachmaninov è veramente l’ultimo dei romantici, un beato sopravvissuto che ha avuto il coraggio delle sue scelte e da parte di certa critica tutta protesa verso l’impietosa liquidazione del passato ha trovato molta, troppa diffidenza. Anche perché negli ultimi anni della permanenza in patria aveva operato una sorta di inversione di marcia che a ben vedere ne impedisce l’inserimento totale in quello stile ottocentesco. Si tratta di musiche come la cantata *Kolokola* su testo di Edgar Allan Poe, le raccolte di romanze su versi di poeti appartenenti al Simbolismo, le stesse *Études-tableaux*, dove all’irregolarità e all’audacia della scrittura s’accompagna un’espressione tragica, grottesca, molto più vicina a Mahler e Schönberg che a Čajkovskij e Brahms: un’autentica parentesi, nell’ambito dell’aspirazione a una bellezza classico-romantica assoluta poi cercata in altre opere precedenti e successive, quelle più note ed eseguite del periodo statunitense.”

All noteworthy German music lexicons of this period adopted a more favorable stance toward the composer. In 1981, *Das grosse Lexikon der Musik in acht Bänden*—an expanded and revised translation of Honegger’s *Dictionnaire de la musique*, and one of the more noteworthy lexicons of the later twentieth century—replaced Honegger’s short entry on Rachmaninoff with a somewhat longer one by Erik Fischer. As noted above, this entry, like Abraham, cites Chopin, Liszt, and Tchaikovsky as Rachmaninoff’s principal influences, but Fischer describes the composer’s style in positive terms: “Rachmaninoff had total command,” he writes, “of an emotional late-romantic musical idiom that for all its chromaticism was quite traditionalistic and lucid, and which could often give rise to melancholic or elegiac associations.”<sup>18</sup> In 1996 Fischer’s article appeared again in a revised edition of *Das grosse Lexikon der Musik* published under a new title, *Das neue Lexikon der Musik*, and again in 2005 in a second edition of the latter title published as *Musiklexikon: in vier Bänden*. The second edition of Seeger’s *Musiklexikon*, published in 1981, features a revised assessment that, though still brief, exhibits quite a different tone than before: Rachmaninoff “was able to succeed at first with only a few works, but in more recent times he has found an increasing place in European and American concert programs.”<sup>19</sup> The assessment in the 1984 *Meyers Taschenlexikon Musik* abstains from assessment, noting merely that the Second Concerto and Prelude in C-sharp Minor were “extremely popular.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “Rachmaninow verfügte souverän über eine spätromantisch-pathetische, bei aller Chromatik durchaus traditionalistische und eingängige Tonsprache, die oftmals Assoziationen des Melancholisch-Elegischen hervorzurufen vermag.”

<sup>19</sup> “Vermochte er sich zunächst nur mit einigen Werken durchzusetzen, gewinnt aber neuerdings in den europäischen und US-amerikanischen Konzertprogrammen zunehmend an Raum.”

<sup>20</sup> “Von seinen Kompositionen wurden sein 2. Klavierkonzert c-Moll op. 18 (1901) und das Klavier-Prélude cis-Moll op. 3, 2 (1892) äußerst populär.”

Although subsequent editions of the *Brockhaus Riemann* published in 1995 and 2001 retained its laconic original assessment from 1979, which was influenced by *MGG*, a new edition appeared in 2012 under the earlier title *Riemann Musik Lexikon* that features a significantly revised assessment. The new entry also updates the bibliography for the first time since 1979. A change of tone is evident in the opening sentence of the stylistic commentary, which formerly constituted all of the commentary but now became only a point of departure: it was no longer Rachmaninoff's "musical language" but his "compositions" (Kompositionen) that "stand occasionally in the vicinity of salon music." Unlike the original statement, this is actually objective, since Rachmaninoff's opus ten bears the title *Morceaux de salon pour piano*. The rest of the assessment is devoted to reappraisal. A statement describing past criticism prepares the way for an affirmative one that sounds almost like a direct response to Blom:

Rachmaninoff's musical language was criticized, in some cases severely, by contemporaries such as Stravinsky or Tchaikovsky for its forceful timbre, which was often felt to be ostentatious. Rachmaninoff's oeuvre must not, however, be reduced to a monotonous and superficial compositional manner; in particular the late works are born of a rather introverted characteristic; a change was emerging already between 1910 and 1917. The liturgical choral works, . . . which at the same time pointed the way for the revival of Russian sacred music, attest to this development.<sup>21</sup>

More significant than all these, however, is the new article that appeared in 2005 in the much awaited second edition of *MGG*. It was written by Christoph Flamm, a German

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<sup>21</sup> "Rachmaninows Musiksprache wurde von Zeitgenossen wie Strawinsky oder Tschaikowsky hinsichtlich ihrer häufig als plakativ empfundenen Klanggewalt teilweise heftig kritisiert. Rachmaninows kompositorisches Gesamtschaffen darf jedoch nicht auf eine in der Textur wenig differenzierte und stark auf Außenwirkung bedachte Kompositionsweise reduziert werden; insbesondere das Spätwerk ist von einer eher introvertierten Charakteristik; bereits zwischen 1910 und 1917 zeichnete sich ein Wandel ab. Die liturgischen Chorwerke, . . . die zugleich richtungweisend für die Erneuerung der russischer Kirchenmusik wurden, geben Zeugnis von dieser Entwicklung."

musicologist specializing in Russian music.<sup>22</sup> Like Norris vis-à-vis Blom, Flamm not only surpassed Abraham's original article in length and detail but also succeeded in assessing Rachmaninoff with a broader historical perspective. A noteworthy aspect of Flamm's lengthy assessment is its determined objectivity; it displays at all times an air of genuine scholarly disinterest, as does, for example, his statement concerning Rachmaninoff's musical identity:

In the sum of his activities, Rachmaninoff was one of the most important Russian musicians of his time. His multiple talents were registered almost in disbelief by his contemporaries. Personally, he saw himself torn back and forth between three careers that could be realized not parallel but only alternately. He saw his real purpose in life in composing, for which he specifically sought space. Nevertheless, it is his compositional work, unlike his achievements as a practicing musician, that is not uncontroversial.<sup>23</sup>

This objectivity is attained in part through an extensive familiarity with the scholarly literature on Rachmaninoff, most of which did not yet exist when Abraham wrote his earlier assessment. Flamm cites David Cannata's meticulous study of Rachmaninoff's compositional process as a corrective to simplistic notions of that process akin to those expressed by Cerchio above.<sup>24</sup> Like Wilson, Flamm rejects the idea that Rachmaninoff's late works evince creative decline. Citing an article by Dorothea Redepenning, he interprets the stylistic heterogeneity of the Fourth Concerto as a "speechlessness" (Sprachlosigkeit) born of Rachmaninoff's alienation

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<sup>22</sup> See Flamm, *Der russische Komponist Nikolaj Metner: Studien und Materialien* (Berlin: E. Kuhn, 1995); Flamm contributed several additional articles on Russian musicians to this edition of *MGG* and has edited numerous Russian scores as well.

<sup>23</sup> "Rachmaninov ist in der Summe der Aktivitäten einer der bedeutendsten russischen Musiker seiner Zeit gewesen. Seine Mehrfachbegabung wurde von den Zeitgenossen geradezu ungläubig registriert. Er selbst sah sich zwischen drei Karrieren hin- und hergerissen, die sich nicht parallel, sondern nur abwechselnd realisieren ließen. Seinen eigentlichen Lebensinhalt erblickte er im Komponieren, für das er gezielt Freiräume suchte. Doch ist sein kompositorisches Schaffen, anders als seine Leistungen als ausübender Musiker, nicht unumstritten."

<sup>24</sup> See David Butler Cannata, *Rachmaninoff and the Symphony* (Innsbruck: Studien, 1999), 39–88.

from his homeland.<sup>25</sup> Referring to the possibility, described in Martyn's biography, that Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances* were conceived as early as 1915, and to the composer's enigmatic self-quotations therein, Flamm validates the work "as a synthesis, as a sum of trodden and untrodden paths."<sup>26</sup>

By comparison with Abraham, Flamm offers a subtler, more objective, and more perceptive interpretation of Rachmaninoff's compositional outlook and development. Abraham's commentary in this regard consisted of his complaint that Rachmaninoff's "Weltschmerz is a little too elegant and refined" and that his style was "as unmistakable as it is limited," but noting a new "harmonic roughness" and sparer orchestral textures in the later works.<sup>27</sup> Flamm comments on Rachmaninoff's musical predisposition non-judgmentally and not only acknowledges but also ventures an interpretation of the stylistic change evident in the late works: "To him," Flamm writes, "music was by nature an expressive art, a personal confession, and hence confined predominantly to a lyrical or a dramatic mode. Only much later did signs of objectivization, ironic refraction, or material alienation appear."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See Dorothea Redepenning, "' . . . Das Undurchdringliche Schweigen erstarrter Erinnerungen . . .': Anmerkungen zu Sergej Rachmaninovs Werken der Emigration," *Hamburger Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft* 13 (1995): 257.

<sup>26</sup> "Diese Musik ist etwa ein Vierteljahrhundert zu spät entstanden, weiß aber um diesen Umstand; sie begründet sich als Synthese, als Summe beschrifteter and unbeschrifteter Wege." See Martyn, *Rachmaninoff*, 252, 349–53.

<sup>27</sup> The original German for Abraham's latter comment, not quoted earlier, is as follows: "Von den Liedern des op. 38 an begegnen viele harmonische Rauheiten (so in der 3. Sinfonie), und die orchestrale Faktur der Werke aus den 1930er Jahren ist weniger überladen."

<sup>28</sup> "Musik war ihm wesensmäßig Ausdruckskunst, persönliches Bekenntnis, und daher vorwiegend lyrischen oder dramatischen Tonfällen verhaftet. Erst sehr spät machen sich Anzeichen einer Versachlichung, ironischen Brechung oder Materialverfremdung bemerkbar."

Owing in large part to his detailed familiarity with the oeuvre and the secondary literature, Flamm is able to offer a perceptive statement on Rachmaninoff's reception. Until the late-twentieth century, comment on Rachmaninoff's reception was restricted, as we have seen, largely to the observation of his popularity with audiences. The very fact that methodical retrospective comment such as Flamm's could be written at all is itself indicative of the improved state of Rachmaninoff's reception, the lexicographical effects of which are the subject of the present chapter. Commenting on the appropriation of the Second Concerto in the 1955 film *The Seven Year Itch*, Flamm notes that Rachmaninoff's music "was and is perceived as a medium for unleashing frenzied emotions, as a narcotic that approaches the borders of the pathological, and it has served precisely this function for the entertainment industry."<sup>29</sup> Flamm observes that "Rachmaninoff continues now as before to be identified essentially with his works of the optimistic decade 1900 to 1910. The extraordinary popularity of these pieces," he continues, "their supposedly undemanding intellectuality, but also the sometimes embarrassing exhibitionism of their interpreters, have always fueled detractors' fires."<sup>30</sup> Finally, Flamm notes that "for decades central-European musicology passed over the Rachmaninoff phenomenon with silence" and that "even today well-known Western authors grant him a marginal position at best (R. Taruskin)."<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, Flamm, referring no doubt to such musicological literature as that

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<sup>29</sup> "Sie wurde und wird empfunden als Medium zur Entfesselung rauschhafter Emotionen, als Narkotikum bis an die Grenze des Pathologischen, und genau in dieser Funktion bedient sich ihrer die Unterhaltungsindustrie."

<sup>30</sup> "Rachmaninov wird nach wie vor im wesentlichen mit seinen Werken des optimistischen Jahrzehnts 1900 bis 1910 identifiziert. Die außerordentliche Popularität dieser Stücke, ihre vermeintliche intellektuelle Anspruchslosigkeit, aber auch der bisweilen peinliche Exhibitionismus ihrer Interpreten haben stets Öl in das Feuer der Verächter gegossen."

<sup>31</sup> "Die mitteleuropäische Musikwissenschaft übergang das Phänomen Rachmaninov jahrzehntelang mit Schweigen. . . . Noch heute räumen ihm namhafte westliche Autoren eine allenfalls marginale Position ein (R. Taruskin)."

which he cites elsewhere in his assessment, suggests that “since the Perestroika scholarly interest, in Russia as well as in the Anglo-American world, has newly awoken. A new picture of Rachmaninoff seems to be emerging,” he continues, “that rejects the mutually dependant hysteria of the critics and the anti-intellectual combativeness of his disciples. This new image is as levelheaded and multilayered as the composer himself was.”<sup>32</sup>

Among Dutch music lexicons, Guido Peeters’s *Encyclopedie van de muziek*, published in 1990, displays none of the negativity of De Vries’s assessment, noting simply that Rachmaninoff “extends the Western school of Tchaikovsky. Representative,” the entry continues, “of his broad melodic, melancholic style is, among others, the brilliant *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*.”<sup>33</sup> More significantly, a new edition of Höweler’s classic *X-Y-Z der muziek* was published in 2003 under a slightly different title, *XYZ van de klassieke muziek*, in order to circumvent Höweler’s prohibition of posthumous changes to his book while retaining its popular appeal.<sup>34</sup> Among the many changes made to the lexicon was the replacement of Höweler’s original, critical assessment of Rachmaninoff—reprinted without change through the 34th edition, published in 1997—with a new, favorable one by Onno Schoonderwoerd that bears several of the hallmarks of reassessment already observed in other places: Rachmaninoff’s relationship to the past is celebrated as one of tradition rather than epigonism, his reputation as a performer is noted but

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<sup>32</sup> “Doch seit der Perestrojka ist das wissenschaftliche Interesse in Rußland wie im angloamerikanischen Sprachraum neu erwacht. Es scheint sich ein neues Rachmaninov-Bild abzuzeichnen, das auf die Hysterien der Kritiker wie auf die anti-intellektuelle Kampfeshaltung seiner Jünger, die sich gegenseitig bedingen, verzichtet—das so nüchtern und so vielschichtig ist, wie es der Komponist selbst war.”

<sup>33</sup> “In zijn composities zette hij de westers georiënteerde richting van Tsjaikovski voort. Representatief voor zijn breedmelodische, melancholische stijl is onder meer zijn virtuoze *Rapsodie over een thema van Paganini*.”

<sup>34</sup> Van der Waa, “Snerpende sinustonen.”

subordinated to his identity as a composer, and his compositional achievements beyond the realm of the piano are stressed:

[Rachmaninoff was] the last of the great romantic composers from Russia. He was initially influenced both by Tchaikovsky and by Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin but created an individual idiom characterized by great lyricism, economic use of materials, and tight-knit structures. Rachmaninoff was, moreover, a phenomenal pianist . . . and a celebrated conductor. . . . The piano figures in many of his works, but in his songs, choral works, operas, and orchestral works Rachmaninoff proved himself also a formidable melodist and an original orchestrator.<sup>35</sup>

This movement among British, Dutch, Italian, and German music lexicons toward a more affirmative, nuanced, and detailed assessment of Rachmaninoff's music brought them back into company with those that had never really espoused a negative or ambivalent view of the composer. Spanish music lexicons evince a broadening of historical perspective. The assessment in Manuel Valls Gorina's 1971 *Diccionario de la música* notes briefly that, "celebrated for his piano pieces, his style oscillates between Russian musical nationalism and post-romanticism taken from Chopin."<sup>36</sup> Josep Soler's 1985 *Diccionario de música* notes similarly that "Rachmaninoff . . . ignored the path opened by Debussy in 1894 and remained faithful to post-romantic aesthetics, traditional forms, and inherited compositional techniques."<sup>37</sup> Like the 1993 *Gran Vox diccionario de música*, Henry Lindemann's *Enciclopedia de la música*, published the same year, praises the composer's versatility: "Rachmaninoff was one of those few musicians

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<sup>35</sup> "De laatste van de grote romantische componisten uit Rusland. Hij werd aanvankelijk beïnvloed door zowel Tsjajkovski als Rimski-Korsakov en Borodin, maar creëerde een eigen idioom, gekenmerkt door een grote lyriek, economisch materiaalgebruik en hechte structuren. Rachmaninov was bovendien een fenomenaal pianist . . . en een gevierd dirigent. . . . De piano figureert in veel van zijn werken, maar in zijn liederen, koorwerken, opera's en orkestwerken bewees Rachmaninov zich ook als een formidabel melodicus en een origineel orkestrator."

<sup>36</sup> "Célebre por sus piezas pianísticas, su estilo oscila entre el nacionalismo musical ruso y post-romanticismo de corte chopiniano."

<sup>37</sup> "Rachmaninov . . . ignoró el camino abierto por Debussy desde 1894 y se mantuvo fiel a la estética postromántica, a las formas tradicionales, y a las técnicas de composición heredadas."

noted equally as a composer, pianist, and conductor, combining the three activities throughout his life.”<sup>38</sup>

Rachmaninoff’s reception in Russian music lexicons of this period remained enthusiastic. The most extensive assessment ever to appear in a Russian music lexicon is the one that was published in 1978 in the *Muzykal'naia entsiklopediia* (Musical encyclopedia), the premier Soviet music encyclopedia. This very detailed assessment was written by IUrii Keldysh, a prominent Soviet musicologist who specialized in Russian music and had already authored a scholarly biography on the composer. Keldysh was also the encyclopedia’s general editor. His assessment proceeds along two lines, one sociopolitical and one musico-historical. The latter describes Rachmaninoff’s relation both to Tchaikovsky and to the Five, the breadth of his expressive range, and the individuality and distinction of his approach to harmony, melody, and orchestration—all common features of positive assessments. The former is one of many efforts on the part of Soviet commentators to present Rachmaninoff’s political views in as favorable a light as possible, presumably in order to ensure his continuing viability as a subject for approved study in the Soviet Union. His public support of the Soviet Army during World War II was enormously significant but couldn’t, apparently, entirely erase from memory his earlier clash with the regime and its damaging effects on his reception in that country. Keldysh’s solution to this problem, as articulated in his assessment, was to cite the composer with the lesser charge of incomprehension: “Rachmaninoff warmly greeted the overthrow of the autocracy in Russia in February 1917 but couldn’t understand the significance of the October Revolution.”<sup>39</sup> Citing

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<sup>38</sup> “Rachmaninov es uno de los pocos músicos que destacó tanto como compositor, como pianista y como director de orquesta, compaginando las tres actividades a lo largo de su vida.”

<sup>39</sup> “Rakhmaninov goriacho privetstvoval sverzhenie samoderzhaviiia v Rossii v fevrale 1917, no ne smog poniat' znachenie Oktiabr'skaia revoliutsii.”

Rachmaninoff's statement from a 1934 interview that "losing my country I lost myself also,"<sup>40</sup> Keldysh emphasized the composer's rootlessness during his exile period and interpreted the late works as a synthesis of "the theme of the homeland . . . with the motive of the tragic solitude of an artist torn from his native soil."<sup>41</sup> If these statements justify Rachmaninoff's political dissidence, Keldysh sought also to justify the pre-Revolutionary music, through an act of willful socialist interpretation. Rachmaninoff became unwittingly "a twentieth-century artist keenly responding to the demands of his time" (khudozhnik 20 veka, chutko otklikavshiisia na zaprosy svoego vremeni):

In his works he powerfully expressed the expectant pathos of coming changes—the passionate impulse toward a better future that preoccupied many avant-garde works of Russian literature and art of the period. Artists frequently equated the protest against social and political oppression with the fight for the liberation of mankind's identity. This impulse also resonates in Rachmaninoff's works. It is the source of the bright, intense expression in his music and its predominantly lyrical origin. But Rachmaninoff's lyricism is distant from the exclusive, subjectively obtained lyric of the decadent salons. His oeuvre is characterized by sociability, "openness" of feeling—is always directed to a wide audience.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Keldysh ignored, however, the composer's immediately following reference to himself as an "exile whose musical roots, traditions and background have been annihilated," which makes it clear that Rachmaninoff was not merely pining for a country to which he could not return on principle. Rachmaninoff, "The Composer as Interpreter," *Monthly Musical Record* 64 (November 1934): 201.

<sup>41</sup> "Tema Rodiny perepletaetsia s motivom tragicheskogo odinochestva khudozhnika, otrovannogo ot rodnoi pochvy."

<sup>42</sup> "V svoem tvorchestve on s bol'shoi siloi vyrazil pafos ozhidaniia bliziaschikhsia peremen, strastnyi poryv k luchshemu budushchemu, kotorymi proniknuty mnogie proizvedeniia peredovoi russkoi literatury i iskusstva etogo perioda. Protest protiv sotsial'nogo i politicheskogo gneta khudozhniki chasto otozhdestvliali s bor'boi za osvobozhdenie chelovecheskoi lichnosti. Etot motiv zvuchit i v tvorchestve Rakhmaninova. Otsiuda iarkaia, napriazhennaia ekspressiia ego muzyki, preobladanie v nei liricheskogo nachala. No lirizm Rakhmaninova dalek ot zamknutoi sub"ektivno-izyskannoi liriki dekadentskikh salonov. Ego tvorchestvo kharakterizuetsia obshchitel'nost'iu, «otkrytost'iu» chuvstva, ono vseгда obrashcheno k shirokoi auditorii."

These sentiments are echoed in highly abbreviated form in Keldysh's *Muzykal'nyi entsiklopedicheskii slovar'* (Musical encyclopedic dictionary) of 1990. More recently, assessments in *Muzyka: Chto o nei dolzhen znat' sovremennyi chelovek* (Music: What the modern person should know about it) and *Kompozitory i muzykal'nye deiateli* (Composers and musicians), both published in 2002, derive their stylistic commentary from Keldysh's assessment but forgo its sociopolitical element.

Assessments in Polish music lexicons of the period likewise adhere to their traditional favorability toward the composer. The third edition of the *Mala encyklopedia muzyki* (Little encyclopedia of music), published in 1981, retains the favorable assessment from the second. As in England, Germany, and Italy, a significant indicator of Rachmaninoff's standing in Polish music lexicography is the detailed assessment that appeared in the country's landmark music encyclopedia, the twelve-volume *Encyklopedia muzyczna PWM* (Encyclopedia of Music PWM). The assessment appeared in 2004 and was written by musicologist, theorist, and critic Leszek Polony. Polony has written much on twentieth-century aesthetic issues<sup>43</sup> and demonstrates unusual sensitivity to this aspect of Rachmaninoff's reception, positing an "essentially modernistic" interpretation of the oeuvre while at the same time "objectifying" the twentieth-century anti-romantic tendency. Polony affirms Rachmaninoff's legacy, rejecting the view that the composer was epigonic, eclectic, or compositionally defined by the piano:

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<sup>43</sup> See, for example, his *Hermeneutyka i muzyka* [Hermeneutics and music] (Kraków: Akademia Muzyczna, 2003); "Powikłania ideologii estetycznych w powojennym pięćdziesięcioleciu" [Complications of aesthetic ideology in the postwar half-century], in *Muzyka polska 1945–1995: Materiały sesji naukowej 6-10 Grudnia 1995 w 20-lecie Zakładu Analizy i Interpretacji Muzyki* [Polish music 1945–1995: Materials of the academic session December 6–10, 1995, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Department of Musical Analysis and Interpretation], ed. Krzysztof Droba, Teresa Malecka, and Krzysztof Szwejgier ([Kraków]: Akademia Muzyczna, 1996), 41–52; *Symbol i muzyka* [Symbol and music] (Kraków: Akademia Muzyczna, 2011). For a biographical summary of Polony, see "Leszek Polony," The Fryderyk Chopin Institute, accessed December 5, 2014, <http://en.chopin.nifc.pl/chopin/persons/detail/id/258>.

Rachmaninoff's oeuvre diverged from the anti-romantic aesthetic tendencies of the avant-garde composers of the first half of the twentieth century, much like the late works of Richard Strauss. It grew out of late romanticism and was its continuation, but it was at the same time also a highly original and essentially modernistic development. It has been unfairly accused of epigonism and eclecticism, and its individual character and artistic value have been underappreciated. . . .

Rachmaninoff's significance in the history of music of the end of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century was wrongly reduced to his virtuoso activities and to a few of his most popular pieces from the rich catalogue of piano works. Rachmaninoff, however, was also an outstanding symphonist. . . .

With the perspective of time objectifying the sharp aesthetic opposition between the first avant-garde music of the twentieth-century and currents emanating from romanticism, it is possible to appreciate the figure of Rachmaninoff as one of the most comprehensive musicians of the twentieth century, equally outstanding as a performer and a creator of music.<sup>44</sup>

Swedish lexicons of this period present a balanced but improving view of the composer.

The new assessment in the 1975 edition of *Bonniers musiklexikon* hails Rachmaninoff as a “distinctive late-romantic” (en utpräglad senromantiker), places more emphasis than before on his Russian roots, and notes the popularity of the Second and Third Concertos. “A blossoming, broad cantabile melodic idiom, tonal splendor, and a brilliant keyboard part distinguish these concertos,” the assessment notes, while adding that they “in their elegiac, but rousing, but also

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<sup>44</sup> “Twórczość Rachmaninowa rozmijała się z radykalnymi, antyromantycznymi tendencjami estetyki awangardy kompozycji 1. połowy XX wieku, podobnie jak późna twórczość R. Straussa. Wyrosła z późnego romantyzmu, była jego kontynuacją, ale zarazem wysoce oryginalnym i modernistycznym w duchu rozwinięciem. Obarczono ją niesłusznie zarzutem epigonizmu i eklektyzmu, nie doceniano jej indywidualnego charakteru i wartości artystycznej. . . .

“Znaczenie Rachmaninowa w historii muzyki końca XIX i 1. połowy XX wieku niesłusznie sprowadzono do jego działalności wirtuozowskiej oraz kilku najpopularniejszych utworów spośród bogatej twórczości fortepianowej. Rachmaninow był zaś także wybitnym symfonikiem. . . .

“Perspektywa czasu, obiektywizująca ostre opozycje estetyczne między I awangardą muzyki XX wieku a prądami wyrosłymi z romantyzmu, pozwala dowartościować postać Rachmaninowa jako jednego z najwszechstronniejszych muzyków XX wieku, równie wybitnego wykonawcy, jak twórcy muzyki.”

brilliantly pathetic feelings sometimes acquire an air of mundanity.”<sup>45</sup> The ultimate effect is affirmative: the Second Symphony is “a magnificent work in his lugubrious mood” (är ett i sin lugubra stämning ståtligt verk), the *Paganini Rhapsody* “masterful” (mästerliga). This assessment was carried verbatim into the 1983 edition, but an abridged version that appeared in the 2003 edition no longer features the critical comment about the concertos. Similarly, the revised assessment that appeared in 1979 in the second edition of *Sohlmans* no longer features its earlier ambivalent portion but features instead a new, nuanced statement concerning Rachmaninoff’s place vis-à-vis early-twentieth-century artistic currents:

Throughout his life he stood apart from the modern musical language of the twentieth century and developed classic Russian and nineteenth-century romantic principles into his own original and distinctive style; on the other hand his work reflected to a great extent the aesthetic and stylistic manner during the early decades of the twentieth century, in particular symbolism and impressionism.<sup>46</sup>

French lexicons of the period present a balanced picture as before. A measure of the difference between Rachmaninoff’s reception in music lexicons in the United States and in France can be found by comparing his treatment in Ewen’s *Musicians since 1900* with that in Alain Paris’s contemporaneous *Dictionnaire des interprètes et de l’interprétation musicale au XXe siècle*. Both lexicons are devoted to performers, but while the former comments in this context on Rachmaninoff’s stature as a composer, the latter doesn’t in any of its three editions, published in 1982, 1995, and 2004.

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<sup>45</sup> “En blommande, brett kantabel melodik, klanglig prakt och en briljant klaversats utmärker dessa konserter, vilka emellertid i sina elegiska, än smäktande, än till det glansfullt patetiska stegrade stämningar ibland får ett drag av mondänitet.”

<sup>46</sup> “Han stod under hela sitt liv vid sidan om 1900-t:s moderna tonspråk och utvecklade de klassiska ryska och 1800-talsromantikernas principer till en egen, originell och särpräglad stil; hans verk avspeglade å andra sidan i hög grad den estetiska och stilistiska hållningen under 1900-t:s första decennier, i synnerhet symbolismens och impressionismens.”

Candé's balanced modernist assessment, quoted above, appeared without modification in three subsequent lexicons by the author published in 1983, 1996, and 2000.<sup>47</sup> A second edition of Honegger's *Dictionnaire de la musique* appeared in 1986, retaining its earlier assessment but adding further that Rachmaninoff's piano and symphonic works are "characterized by a rhapsodic spirit" (caractérisées par un esprit rhapsodique).

Once again, the most favorable assessment in French music lexicons of the period is to be found in *Larousse de musique*, the second edition of which appeared in 1982. The new assessment was written by French musicologist André Lischke, who is of Russian descent and has written extensively on Russian music.<sup>48</sup> Like Gurlitt's *Riemann*, he notes that "the inordinate success of the Second Concerto and Prelude in C-sharp Minor may have harmed other compositions that are no less interesting."<sup>49</sup> He reserves special praise for *Isle of the Dead*, "an underappreciated masterpiece," adding the uncommon observation that in this work "Rachmaninoff proves himself an authentic symbolist."<sup>50</sup> Like earlier commentators such as Ewen and Slonimsky, Lischke notes Rachmaninoff's conservative position in twentieth-century music but emphasizes his individuality all the same:

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<sup>47</sup> These are, in chronological order, Candé's *Nouveau dictionnaire de la musique*, *Dictionnaire des compositeurs*, and *Nouveau dictionnaire de la musique*, new ed.

<sup>48</sup> In addition to his numerous articles, see André Lischke, *Alexandre Borodine* (Paris: Bleu Nuit, 2006); *Histoire de la musique russe: Des origines à la Révolution* (Paris: Fayard, 2006); *Igor Stravinsky* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1986); *La musique en Russie depuis 1850* (Paris: Fayard, 2012); *Piotr Ilyitch Tchaïkovski* (Paris: Fayard, 1993). Biographical information for Mr. Lischke can be found at "André Lischke," France Inter, accessed November 27, 2014, <http://www.franceinter.fr/personne-andre-lischke>.

<sup>49</sup> "Le succès démesuré du 2<sup>e</sup> Concerto ou du Prélude en *ut* dièse mineur a pu nuire à d'autres compositions non moins intéressantes."

<sup>50</sup> "Un chef-d'œuvre trop peu connu, dans lequel Rachmaninov se montre authentiquement symboliste."

A contemporary of Scriabin, Ravel, and Bartók, Rachmaninoff, invariably attached to the tonal system, is without question the last romantic composer in the tradition of Chopin, Liszt, and Tchaikovsky, his three principal models. If this explains his lack of esteem with musicologists, his favor among music lovers and performers has never suffered. It would be wrong to see in Rachmaninoff an exclusively imitative composer. His pianistic style in particular and his melodic invention bear an undeniable stamp of individuality. His tormented, tumultuous, and mournful lyricism takes no deliberate stand with regard to an aesthetic trend, but it directly reflects his nervous, anxious, and introverted personality.<sup>51</sup>

Lischke's assessment later appeared in the first two editions of Larousse's subsequent *Dictionnaire de la musique*, published in 2005 and 2011.

Rachmaninoff's reception in American music lexicons of the period might be summarized by Wilson Lyle's statement, in his 1984 *Dictionary of Pianists*, that "today his stock has never been higher."<sup>52</sup> As mentioned above, Slonimsky's favorable commentary from the fifth edition of *Baker's* appeared in all subsequent editions of that title, published in 1978, 1984, 1992, and 2001, and was carried also into several related lexicons of the late-twentieth century: both editions of *The Concise Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Twentieth-century Classical Musicians*, Slonimsky's posthumous

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<sup>51</sup> "Contemporain de Scriabine, de Ravel et de Bartók, Rachmaninov, immuablement attaché au système tonal, est sans conteste le dernier compositeur romantique, dans la lignée de Chopin, de Liszt et de Tchaïkovski, ses trois principaux modèles. Si cela explique le peu d'estime que lui portent les musicologues, sa faveur auprès des mélomanes et des interprètes n'en a jamais souffert. Il serait inexact de voir en Rachmaninov un compositeur exclusivement imitatif. Son style pianistique en particulier et son invention mélodique possèdent un cachet indiscutablement personnel. Son lyrisme tourmenté, tumultueux, douloureux n'est pas une prise de position délibérée par rapport à un courant esthétique, mais le reflet direct de sa personnalité nerveuse, angoissée et introvertie."

<sup>52</sup> Concise lexicons, as usual, do not generally feature critical commentary, but others contain favorable commentary while ignoring the vicissitudes of Rachmaninoff's reception. The assessment in Christine Ammer, *Harper's Dictionary of Music*, 1st ed. (1972), was carried into three subsequent editions (1987, 1995, and 2004, the last published as *The Facts on File Dictionary of Music*). See also the *Biographical Dictionary of Russian/Soviet Composers* (1989); John Michael Cooper, *Historical Dictionary of Romantic Music* (2013); Philip D. Morehead, *The New American Dictionary of Music* (1991); and *The Harvard Biographical Dictionary of Music* (1996).

*Baker's Dictionary of Music*, and (in slightly abridged form) *Webster's New World Dictionary of Music*.<sup>53</sup> A smaller number actively engaged in reappraisal. The 1983 *Dictionary of Music*, edited by Alan Isaacs and Elizabeth Martin, echoed Norris's assessment from *The New Grove*. Perhaps referring to Blom, David Greene's 1985 *Biographical Encyclopedia of Composers* attributed Rachmaninoff's low regard among some past critics to his "enormous popularity," while noting that "today hindsight has done a good deal to elevate his rank as a composer." Finally, Ted Libbey put an exclamation point on the reappraisal of this period in his 2006 *NPR Listener's Encyclopedia of Classical Music*.

Rachmaninoff continues to be thought of as a throwback, a romantic who was left at the station when the Twentieth-Century Limited pulled out. In fact, as scores such as the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* and the *Symphonic Dances* (1940) show, he was a reluctant modernist, seeking to convey emotion, and perhaps a sense of nostalgia, in an idiom that took into account a good many twentieth-century trends in rhythm, harmony, and scoring. For no other reason than that his music has always been popular and is melodically generous, Rachmaninoff has regularly been dismissed by critics and musical scholars as second-rate. It is an assessment that can no longer be defended.

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<sup>53</sup> While Slonimsky never altered this commentary, he did change his initial description of the composer in *Baker's* twice in a manner that suggests a certain amount of uncertainty on his part concerning Rachmaninoff's ultimate critical standing. The fifth edition describes Rachmaninoff as "famous Russian composer," the sixth and seventh editions (and hence the 1988 edition of *The Concise Baker's*) as "great Russian composer and superb pianist," and the eighth as "greatly renowned Russian-born American pianist, conductor, and composer" (whence his description in the 1994 edition of *The Concise Baker's* and the other titles mentioned above).

## Conclusion

### Rachmaninoff's Legacy Affirmed

In conclusion, music lexicons have served broadly to affirm Rachmaninoff's legacy as a composer. The very fact of his continuous inclusion in music lexicons is itself important evidence of his sustained prominence in Western musical life. He has appeared in virtually every general music lexicon published since his international career began in the early-twentieth century. At first, while his career was still unfolding, entries tended to be brief and journalistic, concerned primarily with reporting basic biographical and stylistic information. By the end of his career, when his music was consolidating a place in the repertoire and inspiring a budding secondary literature, entries had begun to grow in length and detail. At that point, his music also began to elicit criticism in music lexicons. In retrospect, it should come as no surprise that, at the very moment when he seemed poised to achieve canonical status, critical voices arose to question his worthiness. That is the very *raison d'être* of music criticism in any form. While many mid-century assessments, especially European ones, bear witness to this spontaneous process, few commentators adopted a truly dismissive attitude toward him, and even fewer went so far as to negate his legacy as a composer as Scholes, Blom, and Abraham did. Between 1938 and 1972, the only really negative assessments to appear were those by the latter three, De Vries, and Seeger. A similarly small but more concentrated number of negative assessments appeared in Europe during the 1970s and early 1980s, but by then a deliberate reappraisal had already begun. By the early twenty-first century, a new international consensus had emerged, signaled by affirmative assessments in numerous music lexicons of all sizes.

Rachmaninoff's reception in music lexicons has varied not nearly so much in the terms in which it has been conceived as in the relative importance attached to those terms by the

individual commentator. As mentioned in the introduction, these conceptual parameters are rooted in the three ideologies of classicism, modernism, and nationalism, prompting evaluation in terms of depth of thought or feeling, compositional technique, individuality, Russianness, and stylistic contemporaneity. All of these concepts existed in some form before Rachmaninoff was born but none were used to criticize his music in music lexicons until late in his career, in some cases until after his death. Rachmaninoff's national musical identity elicited comment as early as 1908, in *Grove's*, but his Moscow heritage was not interpreted as cosmopolitanism until 1938, in *The Oxford Companion*, as it was by some as late as 1983, for example *La nuova enciclopedia Garzanti*. Similarly, Rachmaninoff's conservatism did not elicit comment until 1939, in Leonard's assessment, and though it was noted by Blom and even lamented by Candé, the only commentator to dismiss Rachmaninoff unequivocally on this basis was Rattalino, in 1972. Leonard was also the first to imply any shortcoming on Rachmaninoff's part in terms of traditional classical criteria, when he wrote that the composer's works for solo piano "lack the depth and subtlety of Chopin's greater works." Thereafter superficiality would prove the most recurring criticism of Rachmaninoff's music, being cited repeatedly during mid-century by commentators of varying national origins and all ideological perspectives. Rachmaninoff's compositional technique also met with universal approbation until Blom suggested otherwise in 1954, followed by Abraham and others. All of the foregoing criticisms of Rachmaninoff's music enjoyed limited circulation and had virtually disappeared from the genre by the early-twenty-first century.

It follows from all this that the historical controversy surrounding Rachmaninoff's music cannot be ascribed to any single ideology or rationale, even one so tempting as modernism. Although the negative assessments of Scholes, Blom, and Abraham appeared during a period of

modernism, they were motivated by nationalism and classicism. Just as importantly, many who have maintained open appreciation of modernistic music have not ipso facto disliked Rachmaninoff, including Kolodin, Ewen, Slonimsky, and even Candé. Thus, the coincidence of Rachmaninoff's English reappraisal with the emergence of post-modernism in the West may simply be coincidence plain and simple.

Nor can dismissive attitudes toward Rachmaninoff be ascribed to any single category of commentator as Schonberg's comment about "so-called 'serious' critics" suggests. As shown in chapter three, the current international consensus itself is signified in part by affirmative assessments in scholarly music lexicons. Authoritative commentators have both praised and criticized Rachmaninoff in equally authoritative music lexicons, their opposing assessments sometimes appearing at roughly the same time. Blom's assessment was followed closely by Slonimsky's, and Abraham's assessment appeared in the same year as the one in Gurlitt's *Riemann*, to name but two of many possible examples.

We have noted instances when commentators with opposing views of Rachmaninoff seem to agree on the nature of his music but disagree concerning its value. Indeed, as Glen Carruthers has noted, "what Rachmaninoff's advocates applaud, and what his detractors decry, is frequently one and the same thing."<sup>1</sup> Just as often, however, critical opinions have strayed so far from each other as to suggest a lack of consensus at the level of perception itself—commentators seem sometimes to be describing not the same phenomenon differently but different phenomena altogether. How can Rachmaninoff's music be "Russian to its very core," possess "a clearly defined and attractive personality," and at the same be "inspired by no very strong national or personal feeling"? Do his themes "possess extraordinary melodic beauty" or are they "artificial

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<sup>1</sup> Carruthers, "The (Re)Appraisal of Rachmaninov's Music," 44.

and gushing tunes”? Do his compositions possess “nobility” or do they “stand occasionally in the vicinity of salon music”? Does the virtuosity of his piano works “explore fully the expressive possibilities of the instrument,” or is it “wholly superficial”? Was his orchestration “among the soundest” of the early-twentieth century, or do his symphonic works “seem as though they were basically conceived for the piano”? Was he “a twentieth-century artist keenly responding to the demands of his time” or “a typical secondary-reactionary character, by nature not very open to new impressions”?

Questions such as these fall outside the scope of this study. We can observe by way of conclusion, however, that assessments of Rachmaninoff’s music have generally grown more favorable as his music has grown more familiar. Some of the most pointed assessments, for example those by Blom and De Vries, appear to have been formed without a thorough knowledge of his oeuvre, judging from the incompleteness of their appended work lists. Other negative assessments were clearly derived from Abraham by way of deference. All of the affirmative assessments in recent scholarly music lexicons, by contrast, feature detailed commentary on the whole oeuvre. A significant characteristic of reassessments in music lexicons is the emphasis on Rachmaninoff’s traditionally lesser-known works, in particular those for unaccompanied choir and those that he composed after leaving Russia. Performers unquestionably played a crucial role in strengthening and furthering knowledge of his music, but we have observed that scholars have also done so in a way that has directly contributed to the improvement of his critical standing in music lexicons. The favorable assessments in *The New Grove* and the recent *MGG*, by Norris and Flamm respectively, rest on a foundation of scholarly studies to which the former contributed personally and to which the latter referred in overturning certain entrenched criticisms.

We can conclude that the tendency to deduce the historical trajectory of Rachmaninoff's international critical reception from his treatment in *Grove's* has contributed to general misunderstanding. Blom's assessment in the fifth edition of *Grove's* was not typical of lexicographical assessments of the 1950s and 1960s. Nor was it typical of assessments published during the composer's lifetime or during any other period generally. What Blom's assessment typifies is the negative opinion of a very small but very authoritative echelon of mid-century English commentators whose assessments were not typical but *atypical* for the period. Ultimately, it is the atypicality of Blom's assessment that makes it so remarkable: traversing the whole range of conceptual parameters for Rachmaninoff's music, he dismissed it on each point. Similarly, Norris's assessment in *The New Grove* must be seen, like Blom's before it, as part of a regional shift in opinion that anticipated and perhaps contributed to—but did not culminate—an international one. Nevertheless, this shift of opinion has occurred in music lexicons. No current assessments describe Rachmaninoff's music as cosmopolitan, old-fashioned, superficial, or technically inept. Quite the opposite. They describe Rachmaninoff as “one of the finest pianists of his day and, as a composer, the last great representative of Russian late romanticism,” “one of the most comprehensive musicians of the twentieth century, equally outstanding as a performer and a creator of music”; these yield a “new image [of Rachmaninoff that] is as levelheaded and multilayered as the composer himself was.”

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