

# **Rachmaninoff as Émigré: Man, Music, and Reception, 1918-1943**

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In late 1917, the composer, pianist, and conductor Sergei Rachmaninoff, for twenty-five years a darling of musical Russia and of lovers of Russian music abroad, gave up everything in a desperate attempt to preserve his family’s well-being and his own artistic and personal freedom. Like so many other Russians who fled the Bolshevik Revolution at that time and in the years that followed, he became an émigré. Though blessed with unique prospects on account of his musical renown, Rachmaninoff did not escape the woes of emigration. Arriving with his family in Sweden on a sledge in the dead of night on Christmas Eve, with nothing more than a few hundred rubles and what possessions he could carry, he sought shelter and financial support from Russian friends who had preceded him in emigration. Though Rachmaninoff regained his footing within a year, thanks to his fabled technical and interpretive powers as a pianist, the experience of losing irretrievably his country and culture left an indelible mark on his personal life and creativity, on one hand, and on his cultural and critical reception, on the other, for the twenty-five years of his life that remained from 1918 to 1943.

To be sure, Rachmaninoff’s émigré status is not the only perspective that informs his music and reception during this last, long chapter of his life. As a prominent composer, he was subject to comparison with historical and contemporaneous composers within the broader Western canon, and as a pianist, he similarly drew comparison with earlier giants of the keyboard such as Franz Liszt and Anton Rubinstein. All of the source types featured in this article could be used to show him in these other contexts as well. What makes his identity as a Russian émigré so important, however, is that it colored perceptions of him in those contexts as well. Born aloft by his great musical fame, his persistent cultural self-identification as a Russian émigré made him a convenient symbol of the broader émigré community that he represented, both to that community itself and to the broader public.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Rachmaninoff’s fame is the necessary point of departure for this discussion, for without it, his émigré status could not have achieved the great significance that it did. As things stood, when he arrived in America on November 10, 1918, unannounced and unexpected, he captured the attention of the musical world no less than on his previous visit nine years earlier, and it is to the first reports thus generated that his image as the archetypal Russian émigré composer can be traced. “Rachmaninoff is recovering in New York from the current influenza,” reported the *Boston Evening Transcript*, “and those whom he has received in convalescence have noted with surprise and a little anxiety the change in his appearance that nine years and recent

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<sup>1</sup> Although during this period Rachmaninoff developed increasingly close ties to American cultural life, as Robin Gehl has argued, his fundamental cultural identity as a Russian émigré was never in question. See Gehl, *Reassessing a Legacy: Rachmaninoff in America, 1918–43* (PhD diss., University of Cincinnati, 2008), 121–28.

experience of flight, exile, and privation have wrought upon him. His eyes . . . are now sunken in their sockets, the heavy bones in his face press protrudingly upon the yellow skin, his cheeks are sunken; the corners of his mouth droop as with remembered suffering.”<sup>2</sup>

Whether Rachmaninoff’s appearance was more affected by the flu than by his emigration is immaterial: the circumstances were right, and the image stuck. “The tragical events which happened in Russia in 1917 forced the composer to leave his native land,” reads a 1919 *Etude* article. “. . . As a real Russian and great-hearted man, Rachmaninoff feels deeply the woes and misfortunes that have befallen his homeland.”<sup>3</sup> The composer himself played a prominent role in bolstering this image, as in his 1930 interview with the *Musical Times*: “Only one place is closed to me, and that is my own country—Russia.”<sup>4</sup>

By far the most influential of the composer’s statements in cementing his image as an émigré composer was the one that appeared in his first full-length biography, Oskar von Riesemann’s 1934 *Rachmaninoff’s Recollections*. The book offered the first vivid account of the circumstances that prompted his emigration in late 1917, supplying the basis for a host of subsequent biographies.<sup>5</sup> It is a dreary picture indeed. Warned by peasants to abandon this, his beloved country estate, Ivanovka, and unable to flee to Europe on account of the Great War, Rachmaninoff was essentially trapped in his Moscow apartment as the October Revolution engulfed the city. There, the account reads, he revised his First Piano Concerto to the accompaniment of gunfire by day and served on the house watch by night. An unexpected invitation to perform in Sweden—which he “attribute[d] to the grace of God”—provided a way out, and he immediately traveled to St. Petersburg ahead of his family to finalize their travel arrangements. “I took a small suitcase and boarded a tram,” he told Riesemann, “which drove me through the dark streets of Moscow to the Nikolai [i.e., Leningrad] Station. It rained . . . a few isolated shots could be heard in the distance. The uncanny and depressing atmosphere of the town, which at that hour seemed utterly deserted, oppressed me terribly. I was aware that I was leaving Moscow, my real home, for a very, very long time . . . perhaps forever.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “Rakhmaninov Returns to America,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, November 20, 1918, sec. 2, p. 11. Here, as throughout the body text of this article, I have silently normalized the spelling of Rachmaninoff’s name in the interest of consistency.

<sup>3</sup> I. Korzuchin, “An Authentic Biography of Rachmaninoff,” translated from Russian by Kurt Schindler, *Etude* 37, no. 10 (Rachmaninoff number; October 1919): 624. See also, *Hugo Riemanns Musik-Lexikon*, 9th ed. (1922), s.v. “Rachmaninow”; Frederick H. Martens, *Rachmaninoff* (New York: Breitkopf and Hartel, 1922), 6; *Grove’s Dictionary of Music*, 3rd ed. (1927), s.v. “Rachmaninov.”

<sup>4</sup> Rachmaninoff, “Some Critical Moments in My Career,” *Musical Times* 71 (June 1930): 558. See also Basanta Koomar Roy, “Rachmaninoff is Reminiscent,” *Musical Observer* 26 (May 1927): 16; H. E. Wortham, “Rachmaninoff and His Piano,” *London Daily Telegraph*, April 29, 1933; Henry Beckett, “Rachmaninoff as Seen by His Own Piano Tuner,” *New York Evening Post*, December 26, 1933, 9; Rachmaninoff, “The Composer as Interpreter,” *Monthly Musical Record* 64 (November 1934): 201.

<sup>5</sup> See Watson G. Lyle, *Rachmaninoff: A Biography* (London: Reeves, 1939), 161–69; John Culshaw, *Sergei Rachmaninov* (London: Dobson, 1949), 40; Victor I. Seroff, *Rachmaninoff* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950) 180–82; Jan Bertensson and Jan Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music* (1956; reprint, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 205–06. It should be noted that Riesemann’s biography was, of course, influential also in much other information about Rachmaninoff besides his emigration.

<sup>6</sup> Oskar von Riesemann, *Rachmaninoff’s Recollections* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1934), 184–86. Ellipses in original.

The effects of this experience on Rachmaninoff the man were profound and lasting: he became a cultural emissary of Imperial Russia even as its culture gradually gave way to that of Soviet Russia. In his performing, in interviews, and in the establishment of the Tair publishing house, he continued to champion Russian music—not only his own, but also that of the *kuchka*, Tchaikovsky, and his contemporaries Scriabin and Medtner. He surrounded himself with Russian customs, foods, literature, and painting, and mingled with other distinguished Russian émigrés everywhere he went.<sup>7</sup> And he gardened, just as he had here at Ivanovka, then as before proudly describing his labors in letters to friends, and when his final illness prevented him from gardening himself, he read seed catalogs.<sup>8</sup>

But recreating Russia around him came at the cost of alienation from the world in which he lived. Writing near the end of his life, Rachmaninoff described his feelings about modern music thus: “I feel like a ghost wandering in a world grown alien.” But this is no less true of his cultural outlook, for alienation is precisely what underlies statements such as the one that appeared in the *New York Evening Post* in 1933: “You cannot know,” he said, “the feeling of a man who has no home. Perhaps no others can understand the hopeless homesickness of us older Russians. . . . Even the air in your country is different. No, I cannot say just how. No, there is no hope for a return. We are exiles.”<sup>9</sup>

Little surprise then, that his music from this period—what little he composed—bears the scars of alienation: nostalgia, yes, but also irony, sarcasm, bitterness, and sometimes grotesqueness. “Certainly I still write music,” he told the *London Daily Telegraph* in 1933, “—but it does not mean the same thing to me now.”<sup>10</sup> His music’s “meaning” changed as the familiar lyrical elements of his established style became objectified by increased dissonance, thinner textures, and the frustration of anticipated climaxes. Much could be said of this from a theoretical standpoint, but consider for now the stark differences between Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto and his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. The concerto begins ominously, the *Rhapsody* puckishly; both are introduced with densely voiced chords (the former in the piano, the latter in the orchestra), but the *Rhapsody*’s are more dissonant and chromatic, to the point of obscuring their tonal function when viewed individually (though it remains clear in context). In the concerto, these chords lead to a melancholy and famously long-breathed melody that lasts, in the composer’s recording, one and a half minutes; in the *Rhapsody*, what follows is, quite literally, an anti-theme: a stripped-down, coolheaded variation on an already compact theme that has not yet been heard. The concerto evokes yearning and eventual fulfillment with a near-constant stream of lush lyricism; the *Rhapsody* confines such lyricism to one variation, no. 18, where it is objectified, like a relic of a bygone era, with the slithering chromaticism of the variation that precedes it and

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<sup>7</sup> Bertensson and Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff*, 223, 292, 358. Rachmaninoff’s milieu included other composers and performing musicians, as well as artists, authors, dancers, directors, and even one aviation engineer, Igor Sikorsky, inventor of the first mass-produced helicopter. His correspondence and meetings with such individuals during this period are so numerous as to preclude enumeration, but see *ibid.*, chap. 23, for a glimpse into his late social life. See also Alfred J. Swan and Katherine Swan, “Rachmaninoff: Personal Reminiscences,” part 1, *Musical Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (January 1944): 16–17.

<sup>8</sup> See letters cited in *ibid.*, 285–86, 382.

<sup>9</sup> Beckett, “Rachmaninoff as Seen by His Own Piano Tuner.”

<sup>10</sup> Wortham, “Rachmaninoff and His Piano.” Italics added.

the variegated passagework of the six that follow.<sup>11</sup> The concerto ends triumphantly with a torrent of piano chords amid a full orchestral tutti; the *Rhapsody* ends capriciously, perhaps even ironically, by frustrating this same procedure at peak intensity.

The effects of Rachmaninoff's emigration on his reception were manifold: public and private, cultural and critical. He became a magnet to other Russian émigrés, who came to view his music as a cultural rallying point and benefitted from his quiet but virtually endless generosity. This is a story that remains to be told in its entirety. The most detailed account of Rachmaninoff's charitable donations known to this author is a conference report by Elena Shabshaevich delivered at the Moscow Conservatory in 2015, which notes the abundance of surviving correspondence and documents at the Rachmaninoff Archive in Washington, DC, and appeals for more research on the subject.<sup>12</sup> The finding aid to that archive lists nearly fifteen hundred donation receipts from 1921 to 1932, and this only includes donations to Soviet citizens. As Shabshaevich notes, Satina estimated to Zarui Apetian that Rachmaninoff donated about a third of his entire income from this period on humanitarian aid for needy Russians—both those in the Soviet Union and those abroad.<sup>13</sup> He gave to acquaintances and perfect strangers, close friends and former musical enemies, distinguished creative artists and military invalids. His correspondence includes letters from the likes of Alexander Glazunov, Konstantin Bal'mont, Emil Medtner, and many other famous members of the Russian cultural intelligentsia, thanking him for care packages delivered through international relief organizations.

And he gave to the young. Among the many surviving letters of gratitude for Rachmaninoff's charity is one containing a picture and biographical sketch of a nine-year-old boy named Ben Wishnowitz sent to the composer from a children's benefit organization called the Boys' Club in response to his requested donation of \$15.50. Born in New York to Russian émigrés, Ben was reportedly a good student who could be found in a corner of the library on any rainy day. His professional goal was to become a doctor, because, in his words, "my father wants me to be one." To make ends meet, his father made coats and his mother worked in a candy shop. Rachmaninoff's donation paid Ben's way to summer camp, which his family had never been able to afford.<sup>14</sup>

In return, the Russian émigré community loved him more than ever. Even placing his donations to the side, his music instilled hope and cultural solidarity in the hearts of Russians far and wide, as Rebecca Mitchell has illustrated in her recent book, *Nietzsche's Orphans: Music, Metaphysics, and the Twilight of the Russian Empire*. Mitchell cites a letter to Rachmaninoff from a Russian émigré who credited the composer with saving his life. Dejected and on the verge of suicide, Sergei Sundukov-Holms attended a performance by Rachmaninoff of his Third Piano Concerto at which, he wrote, "my sorrowful thoughts dispersed. . . . Although I am not a

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Fisk, "Nineteenth-Century Music? The Case of Rachmaninoff," *19th-Century Music* 31, no. 3 (April 2008): 245–54.

<sup>12</sup> Elena M. Shabshaevich, "' . . . Shtob vam nemnogo i teplee, i svetlee stanovilos' . . . ': Blagotvoritel'naia deiatel'nost' S. V. Rakhmaninova zarubezhnogo perioda" ["That it might become both a bit warmer and a bit brighter for you": The charitable activity of S. V. Rachmaninoff of his foreign period], *Russkie muzykal'nye arkhivy za rubezhom. Zarubezhnye muzykal'nye arkhivy v rossii* [Russian musical archives abroad. Foreign musical archives in Russia] 7 (2015): 50.

<sup>13</sup> Zarui Apetian, ed., *S. Rakhmaninov: Literaturnoe nasledie v trekh tomakh* [S. Rachmaninoff: The literary legacy in three volumes], vol. 1 (Moscow: Sovetskii Kompozitor, 1976), 37.

<sup>14</sup> Richard A. Strong to Rachmaninoff, January 7, 1926, box 42, folder 63, Sergei Rachmaninoff Archive, Library of Congress, Music Division, Washington, DC, USA.

musician,” Sundukov-Holms continued, “several motifs remained in my mind for a long time and supplanted sorrowful thoughts,” adding further that Rachmaninoff’s music “eased Russian spiritual suffering and g[ave] them hope for a better future.”<sup>15</sup> Mitchell cites a second letter from a woman who only came to love Rachmaninoff’s music in emigration and who described her joy at knowing that “Sergei Vasil'evich Rachmaninoff exists, that he is recognized around the world, and that he is ours, a Russian, a Muscovite.”<sup>16</sup> In short, Rachmaninoff and his music became a means by which émigrés of the period preserved their cultural identity.

Rachmaninoff’s huge importance to the international Russian émigré community is summarized with special directness and poignancy in a series of presentation volumes sent to him from various Russian colonies from Europe and North America. Some are lavishly decorated, written in ornate old-style Russian calligraphy with illuminated lettering. So touching, emphatic, and revealing are these that at least one ought to be presented here in entirety. The letter that follows—which was written with Easter greetings in 1934 and could have been personally delivered to the composer sometime around his Paris recital on March 23 of that year—forges a direct connection between Rachmaninoff’s music and music-making, his excellence and devotion in promoting Russian culture throughout the world, his charitable support of Russians (in this case, émigrés), and the effect that all this had in instilling pride and solidarity among the Russian diaspora:

Dear Sergei Vasil'evich,

The world is captivated by the conquering power of your musical creativity. You are now without question the leading composer-pianist. Even in these days of ubiquitous crisis and decadence in artistic interests, when concert halls are usually empty, enormous crowds made up of your admirers gather in ecstasy to greet your inspired playing.

This worldwide recognition of Russian genius in your person brings great joy, pride, and comfort to us Russians. You strengthen our faith in a better future for our country. We take pride in you as the mighty, brilliant, embodiment of the great giftedness of the Russian people. Your creative charms and you yourself are manifestations of the Russian spirit. We love you, distinguished Russian patriot, for your devotion to Mother Russia, for your constant remembrance of her, of our suffering brothers who remain there, and of Russian people scattered among foreign lands who drink the bitter cup of rootlessness. From year to year, esteemed Sergei Vasil'evich, at the behest of your wonderful soul, you remember our great privation and troubles. How oft already has all Paris learned that the great Russian artist is giving away his only concert of the season to his compatriots in exile. How high this is indeed at our—alas—low time!

Sergei Vasil'evich! In the years of your greatest triumph, the apogee of your worldwide glory, not for a moment do you forget your belonging to the Russian people or remove yourself from your disadvantaged brothers, but you constantly extend a helping

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<sup>15</sup> Sundukov-Holms to Rachmaninoff, January 2, 1933, quoted in Rebecca Mitchell, *Nietzsche's Orphans: Music, Metaphysics, and the Twilight of the Russian Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 137–38.

<sup>16</sup> E. Medvedova to Rachmaninoff, January 29, 1935, quoted in *ibid.*, 138.

hand to those of them who need it most. For this, we, representatives of Russian organizations at the center of the Russian diaspora, ardently thank and salute you.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, in the critical press, the image of the émigré composer persisted to his death, as his obituary in the *New York Herald Tribune* clearly shows. Naming the composer a “loyal son of old Russia,” the article states that “his music was rooted in the soil of his beloved Russia, but,” it continues, “. . . the Russia of a bygone day, one which really antedated the period of his flight in 1917 from his native land. One hears in all of his music written since that day, with the possible exception of the purely virtuosic *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, the nostalgia for the Russia he was never to see again.”<sup>18</sup> To Olin Downes, chief music critic of the *New York Times*, Rachmaninoff remained, at his death, “a man and an artist without a country.”<sup>19</sup> In a 1939 editorial, Downes had even posited the effects of Rachmaninoff’s exile on his compositional style. Elaborating on the composer’s adherence to the more classical Russian school perceived to be in opposition to the *kuchka*, Downes wrote, “He, the exile, so suddenly and tragically uprooted from everything in his land in which he had faith, might well consider . . . that by hewing to the great symphonic line [i.e., the German symphonic tradition] and the ideals which animated Tchaikovsky, he would best serve his art . . . and thus keep bright, in a world gone dark and insane, the fire around his ancestral altars.”<sup>20</sup>

There is clear evidence, too, that the image of Rachmaninoff as the iconic Russian émigré composer was fully embraced by the broader public. A 1935 letter to Rachmaninoff from one Edmund Rosa from Massachusetts, USA, shows how Riesemann’s biography fed directly into readers’ imaginations about the composer’s musical relation to his homeland. “Since I read your *Recollections* [i.e., Riesemann’s biography],” wrote Rosa, “I feel that since I see you in a more intimate light, I can get a little more out of your glorious music. . . . To me, some of your music, particularly your preludes, seem to express or convey the glory of Russia in the days of its ruler, and then sometimes I feel that in them there is a longing for a Russia that should have been but which never will be.”<sup>21</sup> Like the author of Rachmaninoff’s *New York Herald Tribune* obituary, then, Rosa could not dissociate the sound of Rachmaninoff’s music from his country of origin and the fact of its irreversible transformation under Soviet rule.

So intertwined had Rachmaninoff’s music become with his émigré status that hermeneutical readings of the music sometimes came near to achieving paradoxical results. In at least four written accounts and one verbal one published between 1943 and 1963, the Russian-born English pianist Benno Moiseiwitsch described a conversation that he had with Rachmaninoff in which the two discovered that they had in mind precisely the same program for the composer’s B-minor prelude—returning—and in which the composer revealed that the piece

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<sup>17</sup> Parisian Russian émigrés to Rachmaninoff, Spring 1934, box 59, folder 6, Sergei Rachmaninoff Archive, Library of Congress, Music Division, Washington, DC, USA. The drawing at the head of this ornate letter appears to bear the signature of a certain Alexander Pankov.

<sup>18</sup> Untitled obituary, *New York Herald Tribune*, March 29, 1943, 12; reprinted as “Rachmaninoff, Loyal Son of Old Russia,” *Baltimore Sun*, March 30, 1943, 10.

<sup>19</sup> Olin Downes, “A Romantic Passes,” *New York Times*, April 4, 1943, X7.

<sup>20</sup> Downes, “Russian Artist in Triple Role,” *New York Times*, November 26, 1939, 136.

<sup>21</sup> Rosa to Rachmaninoff, November 1, 1935, box 47, folder 37, Sergei Rachmaninoff Archive, Library of Congress, Music Division, Washington, DC, USA.

was in fact inspired by Böcklin's painting "Returning Home."<sup>22</sup> Recounting the experience again in 1955, Moiseiwitsch denied understanding concretely what kind of return Rachmaninoff had had in mind, since their conversation had gone no further, but by 1963 he seems to have made up his mind: "It was an exile," he said of the prelude, "and that's what Rachmaninoff was." Moiseiwitsch probably only meant to observe that the piece and Rachmaninoff shared a strongly nostalgic character, but by reading the composer's émigré experience into the prelude, he came dangerously close to suggesting that a work composed in 1910 was meant to portray a set of circumstances that came into being after 1917. That so obvious an error could even be risked is indicative of the strength of the association between Rachmaninoff and his émigré status.

Nor was the image lost on Hollywood, which banked on it in the 1932 drama *Grand Hotel*. There Rachmaninoff's music is summoned to help introduce a character who shares much with him: the Russian émigré ballet dancer Gruzinskaia (famously acted by Greta Garbo), who must constantly perform to live but has lost her will to do so, much to the chagrin of her demanding manager. Thanks to the wafting strains of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto (third movement, second theme), her nationality and emotional disposition are revealed even before she comes into view. Lonely, dejected, and tired, she reminisces to this continuing accompaniment about her former life in Imperial Russia, fearing that she has lost herself along with it—thus echoing the very sentiments being propagated about Rachmaninoff in the press at the same time: "Pearls are cold—everything's cold and finished, so far away, so threadbare—the Russians, St. Petersburg, the Imperial Court, the Grand Duke Sergei . . . Sergei . . . is dead, Gruzinskaia . . . it's all gone." Rachmaninoff's émigré image had become dependable enough to bet on.

Like Moiseiwitsch on Rachmaninoff's Prelude in B Minor, *The Grand Hotel's* appropriation of the Second Concerto borders on the paradoxical: How could music that Rachmaninoff composed in Imperial Russia possibly reflect his experience as an émigré of the Revolution? But that is precisely the point: the association was strong enough to endure anachronism. Rooted in the actual circumstances of his private life, founded on his earliest press depictions upon emigrating to the United States, nurtured in his nascent literature, reflected in his music from the period, and strengthened through his quiet but constant charitable work—Rachmaninoff's image as the ultimate Russian émigré-composer was fixed in the public imagination by the mid-1930s.

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<sup>22</sup> See Benno Moiseiwitsch, "Sergei Rachmaninoff, 1873–1943," *Gramophone* 20 (May 1943): 169–70; Moiseiwitsch, "Trends in Piano Playing," *Etude* 73, no. 11 (November 1955), 26–44; Moiseiwitsch, "Rachmaninoff Remembered," *Musical Courier* 164, no. 4 (May 1962), 14–41; Moiseiwitsch, "Reminiscences of Rachmaninoff," *Music Journal* 21, no. 1 (January 1963), 20–68; Moiseiwitsch, BBC interview, 1963, in *The Art of Piano* ([United States]: Kultur, 2011), DVD.