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HOW RADICAL WAS RACHMANINOFF?

The Bard Music Festival examines whether the arch-romantic composer was more modern than he seems.

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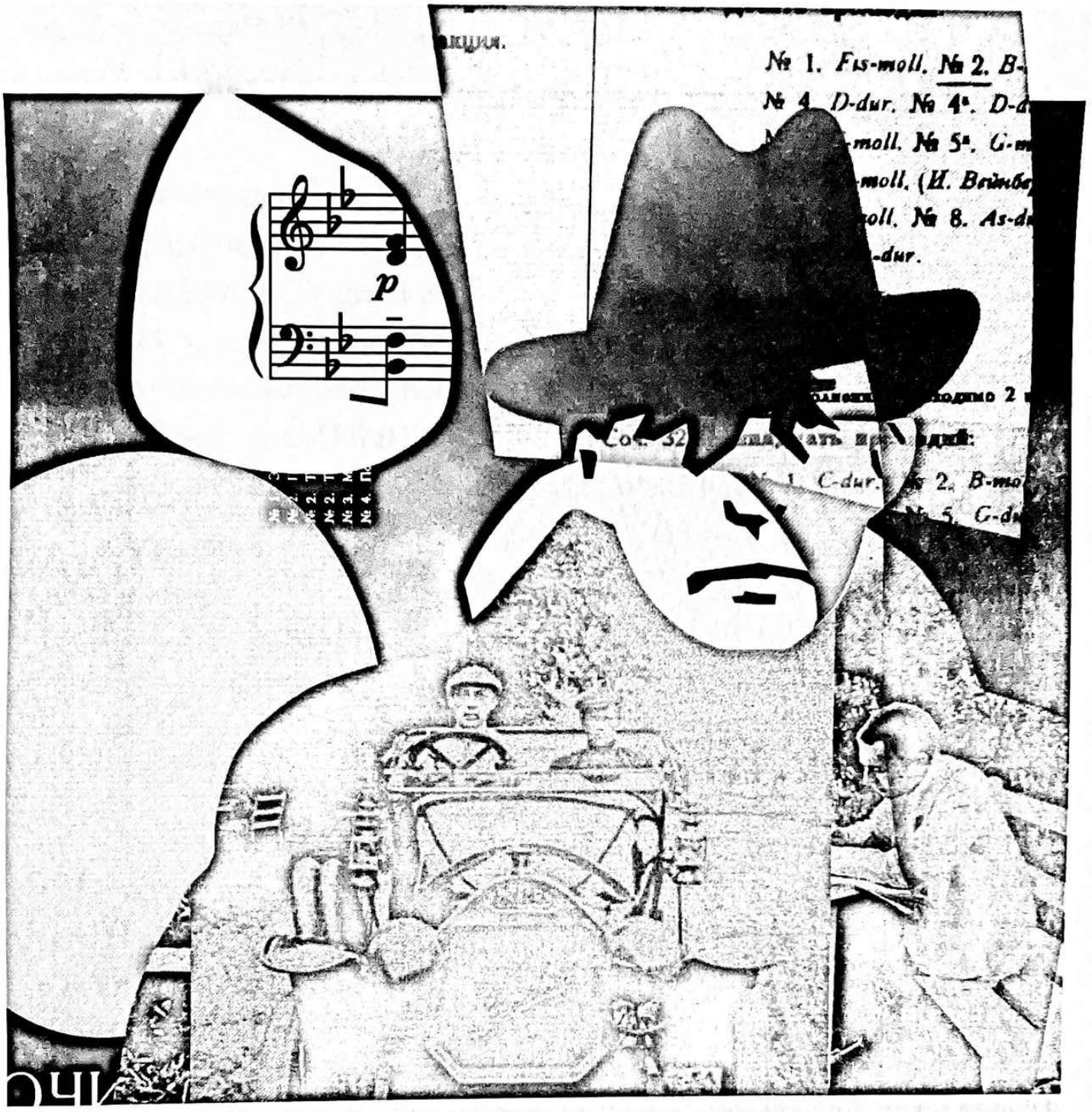

Rachmaninoff could wring luxurious lyricism from elemental materials. Illustration by Lucy Jones; Source photographs from Alamy; Heritage Images / Getty

"Only the anachronism has a chance to outlast the epoch," the Austrian author Franz Werfel wrote, in the early nineteen-forties. At a time of dizzying cultural change, Werfel saw a hidden advantage in the art work that lags behind, its gaze averted to the past. Like many good aphorisms, Werfel's saying is a dubious assertion that points to a complex truth. Perceptions of aesthetic currency—what is modern, what is outmoded—grow blurry as time passes and priorities shift. Heroes of the vanguard lose lustre, background

figures begin to shine. To be anachronistic is to be outside one's time; it does not rule out belonging to the future.

Sergei Rachmaninoff, the focus of this summer's Bard Music Festival, at Bard College, in upstate New York, was almost universally considered a throwback during his lifetime. Progressives scorned him as a purveyor of late-Romantic schlock. Conservatives cherished him as a bulwark against atonal chaos. Neither side saw him as innovative. In 1939, four years before his death, Rachmaninoff wrote, "I feel like a ghost wandering in a world grown alien." Nonetheless, he enjoyed immense popularity, which he retains today. The Second and Third Piano Concertos and the "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini" are fixtures of the repertory; the Second Symphony and the "Symphonic Dances" are in steady circulation; the "All-Night Vigil" is beloved of choral groups; the Prelude in C-Sharp Minor is a standby at piano competitions.

Can such a figure really be deemed an anachronism? The issue came up in a panel discussion at Bard, and it recurs in a companion volume, "Rachmaninoff and His World," which the musicologist Philip Ross Bullock edited for the occasion. How to situate a conservative-seeming composer vis-à-vis modernism is a familiar topic at Bard festivals: it surfaced in past examinations of Sibelius, Elgar, and Korngold, and it will surely arise again next year, when Vaughan Williams has his turn. At these colloquies, someone inevitably proposes that Composer X is more of a modernist than had hitherto been suspected. This year, the historian Rebecca Mitchell noted Rachmaninoff's links to advanced Moscow circles, his interest in jazz, his love of fast cars. She cited Marshall Berman's definition of the modernist as one who is "at home in this maelstrom." The man who met both Leo Tolstoy and Walt Disney fits this description.

One aspect of Rachmaninoff's legacy that deserves greater scrutiny is his peculiar resonance with early-twentieth-century American pop music. George Gershwin, the son of Russian immigrants, could not have composed

"Rhapsody in Blue" without the example of the Rachmaninoff concertos. Frank Sinatra sang no fewer than three numbers inspired by themes from the Second Concerto, which was written in 1900 and 1901: "I Think of You," "Full Moon and Empty Arms," and "All by Myself." Whenever I hear those tunes in their original contexts, I have a sense of time warping: a subject of the Tsar is writing for Tin Pan Alley. Rachmaninoff poses a historical mystery deeper than the quaint clash of the moderns and the conservatives.

In terms of raw musical talent, Rachmaninoff had few contemporary rivals. Born in 1873, he was one of the supreme piano virtuosos of his generation, exhibiting a personality that his colleague Josef Hofmann called "steel and gold." He was a gifted conductor, leading two notable seasons at the Bolshoi Theatre. And he mastered composition in his teens, winning the approval of none other than Tchaikovsky. The Tchaikovsky formula—voluptuous melodies embedded in classical structures—became Rachmaninoff's own, although he added layers of Debussyan harmony and Wagnerian orchestration. The thoroughness of his training is evident in his meticulous craftsmanship, which even his harshest critics could not deny.

Those chart-topping themes, for example, have a way of emerging from terse motivic cells—a smattering of intervals from a narrow stretch of the scale. On close inspection, these cells often show a kinship to the medieval chant Dies Irae—Day of Wrath—which Rachmaninoff cited obsessively throughout his life. His knack for wringing luxurious lyricism from elemental materials is on spectacular display in the Eighteenth Variation of the Paganini Rhapsody. That arch-romantic effusion, which serves as a plot point in "The Story of Three Loves," "Somewhere in Time," and "Groundhog Day," is derived from Paganini's tune by way of a trick of inversion: where the one goes up a minor third, the other goes down a minor third; where the one goes down a minor second, the other goes up a minor second; and so on.

The best Rachmaninoff performances illuminate the interconnectedness of his language. It's not enough to pound out the big tunes and the thunderous

double octaves; players must also animate the lightly skittering, almost Mendelssohnian passagework that surrounds the splashy moments. At Bard, the young Moscow-born pianist Andrey Gugnin proved adept at this sort of quicksilver figuration. At the opening concert of the festival—I attended the first of two weekends—Gugnin offered Rachmaninoff's piano transcription of three movements from Bach's Third Partita for violin. The arrangement is a distinctly freewheeling treatment of Bach, and it represents something more interesting than a faithful adaptation: it documents one major composer listening to and learning from another.

Repetition is another key to Rachmaninoff's structures. At the same concert, the Viano String Quartet, a superb North American group, played the unfinished Second Quartet, which makes one regret that Rachmaninoff neglected chamber music in his maturity. Its slow movement, in C minor, is built on a mesmerizing cello ostinato, rising by scalar steps from C to F and then back down. The violins later introduce a contrary pattern that moves by chromatic steps. Similar devices knit together the doleful sprawl of "The Isle of the Dead," which received a rich-hued performance from the graduate-level student players of TŌN (the Orchestra Now), under the direction of Leon Botstein, Bard's president and the festival's founder. At a subsequent panel, the musicologist Marina Frolova-Walker half jokingly described Rachmaninoff as a proto-minimalist.

Conventional wisdom has long held that Rachmaninoff lost his creative fire after he left Russia in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. Certainly, his productivity dwindled after 1917: in his final twenty-six years, he completed only six major works. Furthermore, he all but stopped setting texts in Russian, cutting short a major career as a vocal and dramatic composer. On a Sunday morning at Bard, we heard a cross-section of Rachmaninoff's finely varied body of songs, with arresting performances by Alexis Seminario, Rebecca Ringle Kamarei, Tyler Duncan, and Zhanna Alkhazova. Later that day, Botstein led the one-act opera "The Miserly Knight," with Nathan Berg giving an impressively glowering account of the title role. It's impossible not to

wonder what Rachmaninoff might have produced in the way of large-scale opera—his three finished operas are all one-acters—if history had turned in a different direction.

Rachmaninoff's output may have grown sparse, but his final major works, the Third Symphony and the "Symphonic Dances," are among his finest, most disciplined creations. The Third wasn't on the Bard program, but in July I caught a vibrant rendition by performers from the Music Academy, in Santa Barbara. The conductor was Stéphane Denève, who smartly paired Rachmaninoff with Ravel—the second suite from "Daphnis et Chloé." Bursts of kaleidoscopic orchestration in the symphony suggest Ravel's influence. In contradiction to Rachmaninoff's public image as a dour spirit, his late scores have a cosmopolitan veneer and a sly, ironic tone. At the same time, the Dies Irae keeps tolling ominously through them: at the end of the Third, the chant is given an up-tempo, syncopated arrangement, as if a dance orchestra were announcing the end of time.

When classical-music organizations present Russian music these days, they often try to distance it, whether subtly or explicitly, from the brutal regime that is waging war on Ukraine. Denève, addressing the Santa Barbara audience before the Third, pointedly mentioned Rachmaninoff's international connections. At Bard, the first person to come onstage was the formidable young Ukrainian pianist Artem Yasynskyy, who launched into an exceptionally grim, inward account of the C-Sharp-Minor Prelude. At a panel discussion, Frolova-Walker, who has lived in the United Kingdom since 1994, said that the Russian assault on Ukraine has changed her perception of Rachmaninoff's time in exile. "I feel some of the anger and some of the bitterness that he must have felt a hundred times more," Frolova-Walker explained. "It's a sense of shame, a sense of horror, a sense of the tragic loss of a country which is still in you but which is doing these horrible things."

Vladimir Putin, for his part, has attempted to claim Rachmaninoff as a personal ornament. In 2013, the Russian leader floated the idea of buying Villa

Senar, Rachmaninoff's Swiss estate. The effort went nowhere, and the villa now belongs to the canton of Lucerne. There has also been talk of somehow removing the composer's body from its resting place, in Valhalla, New York. In June, in Moscow, the first edition of the Rachmaninoff International Competition for Pianists, Composers, and Conductors took place. Piano contestants came from all of four countries: Russia, China, Belarus, and Brazil. Denis Matsuev, the competition's director, said in a video, "Rachmaninoff's music is Russia. When you hear this music, you imagine the vast expanses of our nature, their sheer scale, these woods. This is music with a huge sigh." On the last point, there can be little argument. ♦

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