RACHMANINOFF SYMPHONY #2 (1908)
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REMINDER ON MUSICAL HISTORY:
➢ Renaissance & Middle Ages.
➢ Baroque (1600-1750) - Bach, Handel, Vivaldi.
➢ Classical (1750-1827) - Haydn, Mozart, early Beethoven.
➢ Romantic (1827-1900) - Late Beethoven, Brahms, Berlioz, Schumann, Tchaikovsky, RACHMANINOFF, Mahler.
➢ 20th Century - Stravinsky, Copland, Bartok.

ROMANTIC ERA AESTHETICS:
➢ Composer’s need for expression overrides other concerns.
➢ Compositional liberty with Classical Era musical forms.
➢ Unrestrained emotion.
➢ Nationalism.
➢ Exoticism.
➢ Program music.
➢ Ever enlarging orchestras; ever lengthening works.
➢ Emergence of the “modern” conductor.

HISTORY OF RUSSIAN CONCERT MUSIC:
➢ Peter the Great (1682-1725) builds St. Petersburg: 1703.
  ▪ Emergence of Russian music: Mikhail Glinka (1804-57),
  ▪ Post-Glinka, “the Five”: Mily Balakirev (1837-1910), Caesar Cui (1835-1918), Modest Mussorgsky (1839-81), Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-87), Alexander Borodin (1833-87).
➢ The Conservatory Tradition: Anton Rubinstein (1829-1894) founds St. Petersburg Conservatory, 1862; Nicolai Rubinstein (1835-1881) founds Moscow Conservatory, 1864.

➢ Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) joins faculty of Moscow Conservatory: 1866.

➢ Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) graduates Moscow Conservatory: 1892.

RACHMANINOFF BIOGRAPHY (1873-1943):

➢ Born in north-west Russia to a family of impoverished aristocrats
➢ Moscow Conservatory under Zverev, (1885-92); meets Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakoff.
➢ Piano Concerto #1: 1891
➢ Disastrous premier of Symphony #1 in St. Petersburg: 1897.
➢ Creative despair and medical treatment afterwards: 1900.
➢ Piano Concerto #2: 1901.
➢ Conducting career, including Bolshoi: 1904-06.
➢ Symphony #2: 1908.
➢ First American tour & Piano Concerto #3: 1909.
➢ Russian Revolution: 1917; Rachmaninoff in exile: 1918, settles in New York.
➢ Career mainly as concert pianist for remainder of his life.
➢ Piano Concerto #4: 1941.
➢ Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini: 1934.

HISTORY OF SYMPHONY #2:

➢ Composed in Rachmaninoff’s Dresden retreat, 1906-1907.
➢ First performance at St. Petersburg, January 1908, conducted by Rachmaninoff.
➢ Longest Russian symphony of the pre-Soviet era. Was subjected to cuts for many years; nowadays performed fully.

SYMPHONY #2, MOVEMENTS:

➢ 1. Largo – Allegro Moderato (E minor): Sonata Form.
➢ 4. Allegro Vivace (E major).
MOVEMENT 1:

Introduction:

➢ Begins pp in low strings with a dark melody, a motto that is the basis of the symphony.
➢ The motto is made of a three-note rising idea followed by a pair two-note drops, “pivoting semitones” (Martyn).
➢ This is followed by a two-note “sigh” in winds.
➢ Violins play a melody derived from the motto. The two phrases of this melody are derived from the two phrases of the motto.
➢ This violin melody will give rise to many variations throughout the symphony.
➢ This sequence is repeated, ending with yet another low string motto.
➢ The motto is now developed, initially in polyphony, with its fragments making imitative entrances, and rises to a climax.
➢ The “pivoting semitones” are developed in a louder passage that rises to a bigger climax.
➢ Downs characterizes the music as “Twisting and turning upon itself in characteristic Rachmaninoff style.”
➢ Solo English horn provides a transitional passage into exposition with a pretty melody based on the two-note “sigh” and violin melody of the opening.
➢ NOTE: This long introduction takes up almost ¼ of the movement, and stays on the same musical material. Composer aims to create a lasting impression of the motto.
➢ NOTE: All important transitions in this movement will be marked by soft, single instrument passages, as with the English horn melody.

Exposition:

➢ Theme I (E minor) in violins is announced by the three note motto idea in winds.
➢ Theme I is closely related to the violin melody of the introduction, with a slightly different rhythmic profile. It is repeated, slightly varied in rhythm, and extended.
➢ Brief modulating bridge, louder, tutti.
➢ Solo clarinet announces Theme II.
➢ Theme II (G major), is derived from the pivoting semitones of the introduction motto; “Gentle sighing figure for winds” and low strings converse with “murmuring strings” (Downes), in a quiet passage followed by a soaring melody that sounds similar to Theme I in high strings.
➢ Theme II is repeated and extended, music rises.
➢ Closing section features a gorgeous melody, “one of Rachmaninoff’s beautiful, ever descending melodies” (Steinberg).
➢ Brief codetta, music still descending, quietly ends exposition.
➢ Transition into development in low winds.
Development:

➢ Begins with solo violin playing a lyrical variation of the introduction melody.
➢ Strings respond loudly, with the same motif, rhythmically altered.
➢ Bassoon repeats the violin melody in variation, orchestral response louder, repeated, extended.
➢ The three-note motive of the introductory motto is developed in an agitated passage; music dies down to a transitional passage.
➢ Dramatic two-note orchestral sighs (from introduction material) with loud tympani rolls, followed by Theme I based responses in strings.
➢ A slow crescendo leads to a stormy passage developing the introductory motto and Theme I fragments.
➢ The storm continues with loud brass accompaniment.
➢ Theme I reappears amid the storm and brass fanfares.
➢ NOTE: this is the only return of Theme I after Exposition; it is subtle, easy to miss.
➢ After one last dramatic crescendo, music slowly dies down as if exhausted.
➢ Violins & violas play a variation of the earlier, transitional English horn melody.
➢ NOTE: This development sounds like Brahms and Tchaikovsky especially in its later, stormy section.

Recapitulation:

➢ Theme II (E minor) reappears in winds and low strings.
➢ Theme II is repeated and extended as in the Exposition.
➢ The closing music is a glum variation of that in the Exposition, Rachmaninoff’s “gorgeous…ever descending” melody altered in mood.
➢ Codetta from end of Exposition, now ends the Recap.
➢ NOTE: Recap into a second theme is unusual in Sonata Form movements, but employed occasionally by late Romantic composers. However, Rachmaninoff’s mentor Tchaikovsky used this narrative device in two of his six symphonies (#2 &4).

Coda:

➢ The stormy musical material from late development briefly returns.
➢ Crescendo with an accelerating tempo ends the movement with ff concluding chords.
➢ NOTE: In his symphonies #2 & 4, Tchaikovsky brought back Theme I at the very end of his first movements, after recapping into Theme II, thus rounding out the composition. Rachmaninoff does not do this.
MOVEMENT 2:

This movement is largely derived from a Gregorian Chant version of the “Dies Irae” (Day of Wrath), of the Latin Requiem Mass. Rachmaninoff made frequent use of this melody in his compositions.

A-B-A’:

- The scherzo (A) is a spirited dance (A minor). Strings present a fast, rollicking rhythm, onto which horns intone a variation of the “dies irae”, immediately followed by the scherzo theme in violins. This sequence is repeated in slight variation.
- The theme is subjected to development in a loud passage and restated.
- Music calms down, and solo clarinet transitions to the trio (B).
- The trio is a lush, lyrical extended tune on strings. “Rachmaninoff ...gives us one of his broadly Romantic tunes.” (Steinberg).
- A longer transition into decapo (A’); “quietly stalking” (Steinberg) music in winds, obviously related to the “dies irae”.
- The spirited dance is briefly restated (A’), in slight variation.
- Music quiets down and the tempo progressively slows, eventually pausing, giving the impression that the movement is about to end.

Fugue and Development:

- A fast fugue begins in violins with a sudden, jolting clash of cymbals.
- The fugue theme is a speeded up derivative of the “dies irae”.
- The fugue features four lines of melody in polyphony, entering in imitative sequence from high to low. It maintains a fast tempo.
- Music becomes homophonic, slower and quieter, with the fugue theme accentuated by horn and wind calls.
- The fugue theme is developed in a march-like section.
- Quiet, hesitant music implies transition back to Scherzo. Not quite yet!
- The development reappears, initially slow and quiet, but soon rises to a crescendo at faster tempo, leading to the return of Scherzo theme (A).

A-B-A’:

- Scherzo theme stated twice as in the beginning of the movement,
- It is then extended in a new section which prominently features the glockenspiel in a bell-like accompaniment.
- One more statement of Scherzo theme is followed by solo clarinet transition to Trio (B).
- The lush trio melody and subsequent ”stalking” transition repeated.
- Decapo (A’) is still abbreviated, but it is a longer, varied version of the first Decapo.
- Music dies down into fragments of Scherzo theme, accentuated by tympani rolls, in transition to Coda.
Coda:

➢ Loud high brass chorale (French horn & trumpets), on an obvious variation of the “dies irae”, alternate with fragments of Scherzo theme, accentuated by tympani beats.
➢ Low brass chorale (trombone & tuba) on the same version of “dies irae”.
➢ Quiet Scherzo theme fragments fade away to finale.

NOTES:

➢ This movement is best liked by scholars and critics for its brilliant, upbeat spirit, uncharacteristic of Rachmaninoff’s music, and for its inspired instrumentation.
➢ Except for the trio, whenever possible the composer refrains from literally repeating himself, such repetition being no longer compatible with late Romantic Era aesthetic.
➢ The overall complex structure of the movement’s composition is also in line with late Romantic Era expectations.
➢ Rachmaninoff uses the “Dies Irae” in a context with no reference to death. While this tune is most evident in Movement 2, it is “rarely far below the surface in some form or another” in the entire work. (Martyn). Indeed, the opening motto of the Movement 1 is derived from it.

MOVEMENT 3:

A:

➢ Starts as though in mid-phrase with triplets on violas, after which violins play Theme I (A major), a gorgeous, lyrical, rising melody, the most famous tune of this symphony. “Rachmaninoff’s melodic genius working at full power.” (Steinberg).
➢ Theme I is a slight variation of the violin melody from the First Movement Introduction.
➢ Solo clarinet now follows with Theme II, a new, lyrical melody, long and leisurely. This is an aria-like song. “Twenty-three measures, ...never repeating itself literally, though circling about a few notes within a limited compass.” (Steinberg).
➢ This beautiful clarinet melody is derived from the opening motto of the First Movement Introduction.
➢ Counter-melody in strings leads to a louder, faster Theme I.
➢ Music calms down into a codetta, then a pause.
B: Codetta melody in strings alternates with repeated Theme II motive in oboe. Music is static.

- Strings extend and develop the codetta melody in a louder, more agitated passage.
- A new variation of the melody is sequenced higher and higher, music swells into a brief but rousing rendition of Theme I.
- Music calms down, then a pause.

A: Theme I motive repeated by several instruments in a quiet, lyrical passage.

- Full Theme I melody in winds, with quiet orchestral accompaniment.
- Theme II, previously on clarinet, now re-appears in strings, in exact replica.
- String counter-melody returns and leads to a rousing rendition of Theme I, in variation.
- Theme I fragments gradually fade away, as though into the night, in a serene passage.
- Movement ends quietly, with a chorale-like recollection of Theme I fragments.

MOVEMENT 4:

Exposition:

- “Opens with a wild burst of energy” (Downs), with Theme I (E major), an exuberant tune, with a fast, rollicking rhythm, “a whirling dance….like a celebration of some festival.” (Martyn)
- The mood is noticeably brighter than the First Movement, the key change from E minor to E major evident.
- Music quiets down and a static transitional passage with soft tympani beats anticipates Theme II (G# major).
- Theme II is a quiet march, a Slavic sounding melody. Its slow, stately character is in sharp contrast to the lively Theme I.
- NOTE: Theme II contains elements of the “pivotal semitones” and the rising violin melody of the introduction from the First Movement.
- Theme I music returns, loud and animated. When this music quiets down to a brief concluding gesture, loud tympani beat and short fermata, it gives the impression, false as it turns out, that the exposition is over and development will begin.
- Theme I material briefly restarts, but soon transitions into a surprise: another of Rachmaninoff’s grand tunes in strings. The Exposition is still “on”, and this tune now Theme III (D major).
- Like its predecessors in prior movements the grand tune is presented over many measures, leisurely, lyrical and expansive. It takes up nearly as much time as everything that has preceded it.
- The tune gradually fades and a transitional passage prepares for the “real” development.
- This transitional passage recalls Theme I of the Third Movement.

Development:
Brief. In two sections.

First section features Theme I motives juxtaposed against Theme II motives, then against motives of themes from past movements.

Transitional music.

Second section is an exciting crescendo based on a Theme II motive, starting slow and gaining speed like a train that then turns into a rocket, rising to a frenzy. Amid the melee emerges Theme I. Recap has begun.

This remarkable crescendo is a “network of falling scales, slow and fast, high and low, syncopated and straight”, eventually creating a “swirl of sound” that sounds like multiple ringing bells. (Quotes from Steinberg).

Recapitulation:

- Theme I (E major) repeated in variation, still exuberant.
- Theme II (C# minor) restated after transition.
- Closing music derived from Theme I, similar to Exposition.
- Theme I material is now extended.
- Music slows, becomes anticipatory.
- Another speeding crescendo based on Theme I motive leads to Theme III (E major), the “grand tune” of this movement.
- The “grand tune” is loud and majestic, with cymbal clashes towards the end.

Coda:

- Brief, dramatic chords with cymbal clashes, race towards finale. “A blood stirring rush to the close.” (Steinberg)
- NOTE: The Coda is very brief because the restated “grand tune”, in the narrative of this movement, functions as a coda.

CONCLUSION:

- Rachmaninoff’s Second Symphony is the “Russian Lyric Symphony….that has attracted concert goers and made the work…..into a popular favorite.” (Martyn)
- “The peculiarly Russian quality of every bar Rachmaninoff wrote originates from within the music…Rachmaninoff makes virtually no use of Russian folk music. He is so profoundly Russian himself that he has no need of folk music.” (Martyn)