In 1939, a CBS poll of listeners asked which living composers would still be performed in a century’s time. The resulting list is prescient: “the public gave Rachmaninoff third place in a list of ten names. Only Jean Sibelius and Richard Strauss were ahead of him; those after him included Stravinsky, Prokofieff, and Shostakovich.” Of the six figures named here, five have been the subject of previous Bard Music Festivals, so it is fitting that Rachmaninoff’s time has come at last. If the directness and accessibility of his music have long appealed to audiences worldwide, then the story of his life satisfies an equal fascination with some of the most vivid pages of twentieth-century history. Born in Russia in 1873, he established himself as one of the most famous composers, conductors, and pianists of the turn of the century, not just in Russia, but in Europe and America too. After he emigrated to the United States in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, he became the most prominent symbol of the fate of Russian culture in exile. His music nourished the nostalgia that many émigrés felt for their lost homeland, and for non-Russian audiences, his aristocratic bearing and seemingly old-fashioned music evoked the values of a society and a culture that had been swept away by warfare and revolution. His death in Los Angeles in 1943 marked the passing of “the world of yesterday,” to draw on the title of Stefan Zweig’s memoirs of pre-war Austro-Hungary, which first appeared in English that same year.

Yet for all that Rachmaninoff continues to top audience polls, and his solo piano pieces, concertos, and symphonic works are central to the modern concert and recording repertory, other works—notably his three operas and his many songs—are less familiar. And despite—or perhaps because of—his great popularity, Rachmaninoff has had perhaps more detractors than any other major composer. Even in his lifetime, he was dismissed by many as the embodiment of conservatism and anachronism,
and ever since he has been judged—and found wanting—by the arbiters of taste and progress. In 1954, Eric Blom, editor of the fifth edition of *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, offered an infamously condescending view of Rachmaninoff’s claim on posterity:

As a pianist Rakhmaninov 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. . . . 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 Rakhmaninov’s works had in his lifetime is not likely to last, and musicians never regarded it with much favour.  

In a preface to an earlier biography by Victor Seroff, Virgil Thomson enumerated what he saw as the characteristic features of his style—“his passionless melancholy, his almost too easy flow of melody, his conventional but highly personal harmony, the loose but thoroughly coherent structure of his musical discourse”—and suggested that they amounted to “a retreat from battle, an avoidance of the contemporary problem.”  

The most withering judgment belonged to Theodor Adorno, whose avant-garde credentials precluded any understanding or acceptance of Rachmaninoff’s music or its popularity. Writing about the C-sharp Minor Prelude, he declared: “it sounds tremendously difficult and at all events very loud. But it is comfortingly easy to play: the child knows that the colossal effect cannot misfire and that he is assured in advance of a triumph that has been achieved without effort.” It was, he pronounced, a “triumph for infantile adults.”  

Even more influential than Rachmaninoff’s critics were his admirers. In 1946, a group of friends compiled a series of vignettes and reminiscences of the composer. Edited by the artist Mstislav Dobuzhinsky and published by the composer’s sister-in-law Sofiya Satina, *Pamyati Rakhmaninova* (In Memory of Rachmaninoff) may not have been a scholarly work, yet in curating his image so assiduously, it established a set of myths that have proved hard to shake off. Take, for instance, Mark Aldanov’s brief essay, which sees Rachmaninoff as fundamentally conservative in spirit:

In the field of art, the nineteenth century in Russia was an extraordinary phenomenon, to be compared only with the seventeenth century in France—“le grand siècle.” . . . Rachmaninoff was a man of the nineteenth century. Fame
Philip Ross Bullock

came to him in the twentieth century, but only thanks to and on account of what he was given by the nineteenth—the only truly civilized century in the history of the world.6

Rachmaninoff himself was complicit in perpetuating such an interpretation of his music. In an interview published posthumously in 1959, he reportedly claimed: “I reflect the philosophy of old Russia—White Russia—with its overtones of suffering and unrest, its pastoral but tragic beauty, its ancient and enduring glory.” “I am,” he concluded, “a Victorian-Edwardian—actually the last of the romantic composers.”7 In another interview, seemingly given in 1939 but held back for publication until a week after his death, he expressed feelings of loss and regret. “I feel like a ghost wandering in a world grown alien,” he confessed to Leonard Liebling, editor of The Musical Courier.8

His estrangement from the world was not just the result of exile, but of his inability to come to terms with musical modernism:

I cannot cast out the old way of writing, and I cannot acquire the new. I have made intense effort to feel the musical manner of today, but it will not come to me. Unlike Madame Butterfly with her quick religious conversion, I cannot cast out my musical gods in a moment and bend the knee to new ones. Even with the disaster of living through what has befallen the Russia where I spent my happiest years, yet I always feel that my own music and my reactions to all music, remained spiritually the same, unendingly obedient in trying to create beauty. . . . 9

Statements such as these—and there are plenty of them—have given rise to a view of the works that Rachmaninoff wrote before his emigration as static, almost pictorial evocations of the lost world of tsarist Russia. Similarly, his long periods of creative silence after his emigration have been interpreted as manifestations of debilitating homesickness, and the works he did compose during his long exile in Western Europe and North America have been reduced to nostalgic testimonies of loss.

The term “nostalgia” was invented by a seventeenth-century Swiss medical student, Johannes Hofer, to describe the symptoms he identified in individuals who had been displaced from their homelands.10 The idea was not a new one, of course, but what Hofer did was translate the German Heimweh and French maladie du pays into the more scholarly sounding nostalgia. Comprising two Greek words—nostos (return to one’s native country) and algos (suffering or grief)—his neologism externalized
irreducible and individual human experience into hard and universal scientific fact. If nostalgia has long clung to Rachmaninoff’s reputation, so too has another word from the medicalized language of the emotions: melancholy. One of the four temperaments originally proposed by the Greek physician Hippocrates (the others were the sanguine, the choleric, and the phlegmatic), melancholy was central to the early modern vocabulary of the emotions, before being repurposed by Sigmund Freud in his 1915 essay *Mourning and Melancholy*. Here, Freud contrasts two differing reactions to loss. The first is a normal, even healthy process, in which the individual comes to terms with the absence of someone or something beloved (“one’s country, liberty, an ideal”). The other reaction is that of melancholy, whose symptoms include “profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and the lowering of the self-regarding feelings.”

These histories and etymologies may not come consciously to mind when we listen to Rachmaninoff, describe our reactions to his music, or read the criticism of others, yet they have implicitly shaped the reception of his works. The story of the botched premiere of the First Symphony in St. Petersburg in March 1897 has been often told, as has the story of Rachmaninoff’s slow recovery from the depression it provoked in him. The therapy that he underwent with Nikolai Dahl in early 1900 has given rise to the idea of his music as an outward projection of inward psychological suffering. As Virgil Thomson put it: “his depressive mentality has come to represent to the Western world a musical expression both specifically Russian and specifically attractive.” Yet the work that Rachmaninoff dedicated in gratitude to Dahl—the Second Piano Concerto—affirms psychological recovery and revels in the return of creativity and inspiration. Similarly, the works that Rachmaninoff composed in emigration represent hardy resilience and a vital will to express himself in new surroundings and to new audiences. They are decidedly not the debilitating symptoms of an unconquerable nostalgia for a world to which he knew he would never return. Rachmaninoff may have mourned the Russia of his birth, yet he was more able to understand, accommodate, and savor the modern world than has often been appreciated.

Here, the house that Rachmaninoff had built in the early 1930s at Hertenstein on the banks of Lake Lucerne provides a framework for reassessing the place of his music in the twentieth century. In one sense, he was seeking to recreate the atmosphere of Ivanovka, the estate in the Tambov region that originally belonged to his wife’s family, and whose practical management he oversaw with notable efficiency. Certainly the gardens at Villa Senar (named after the composer and his wife—i.e. Sergei and Natalya Rachmaninoff) were designed to evoke the Russian countryside: “Natalya Aleksandrovna constantly teased Sergei Vasilyevich
that in preparing such a level, flat area for a meadow and a garden, he wanted to turn Switzerland into Ivanovka.” Yet the house itself comes as something of a surprise. Designed by Alfred Möri and Karl-Friedrich Krebs, it is a starkly beautiful, elegantly rational building, very much in the spirit of the Bauhaus movement (see Figure 1). Rachmaninoff paid great attention to every detail of its construction, creating nothing less than a modernist Gesamtkunstwerk, whose confident feeling for contemporary design reveals something unexpected about his tastes. Sebastian Jacobi enumerates its contents:

a small, plain fold-out bureau with its original frame painted over in light grey, in the style of Josef Frank; a larger writing desk veneered in walnut, reminiscent of Erich Dieckmann’s furniture designs from his time at the institution Bauhochschule in Weimar. A tubular-steel sofa in the style of Le Corbusier unexpectedly confronts the visitor in the cellar and, one room further on, in the former laundry, a large extending table with a sophisticated extension mechanism, presumably a custom-made item, also brings Le Corbusier to mind. Other pieces of original garden and kitchen furniture, as well as original free-standing cabinets, all of which have been painted over

Figure 1. Architectural sketch for Rachmaninoff’s home, Hertenstein, Switzerland, 30 December 1930.
many times and used for purposes other than those originally intended, are also to be found in other rooms. For instance, there is also a small wall-mounted sideboard in the gardener’s house. The evidently reconstructible historical kitchen fit-out has the look and feel of a combination of Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky’s “Frankfurt Kitchen” and the kitchen furniture that Mies van der Rohe designed for residential buildings. Many of the surviving pieces of furniture blend to form a collective in terms of design, enabling a symbiosis between the architecture and the interior space.15

As Villa Senar amply demonstrates, Rachmaninoff was entirely able to respond to the modern world. That was true enough in his daily life, as suggested by his love of fast cars, transatlantic liners, speedboats, and the latest comforts of Möri and Krebs’s Bauhaus architecture. And beneath its lush surface, Rachmaninoff’s music has more sinew and energy than its reputation suggests. His genius was to sound the grandeur of the nineteenth century—whether as a composer or as one of the world’s most feted piano virtuosos—and repurpose it for a new era and a new world. Why, then, does the image of Rachmaninoff as belated, conservative, nostalgic, and even sentimental persist? The use of his music in films such from Brief Encounter (1945) to Shine (1995) is certainly one factor, as is a performance tradition that has often emphasized lushness over the puddeur to be heard in his own recordings. But the most significant factor is surely our understanding of the nature and origins of Russian musical modernism. In many respects, our narratives are indebted to the city of St. Petersburg, which produced not only composers such as Prokofiev and Stravinsky, but also influential catalysts and mediators such as Serge Diaghilev and the coterie of artists and writers associated with the Mir iskusstva (World of Art) movement and later the Evenings of Contemporary Music. In turn, they went on to shape Western European perceptions of modern Russian music, not least through the work of the Ballets Russes. As Rachmaninoff’s first “biographer,” Oskar von Riesemann, observed:

The attitude of Paris audiences towards Russian music is well known. They have always upheld St. Petersburg. The “Nouvelle Ecole Russe,” chiefly represented by Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, Moussorgski, and Glazounov, and recently also by Stravinsky and Prokofyeff, is counted as the only movement worth considering. All works originating from there are sure of a friendly reception. Moscow, on the other hand, had a hard fight for popularity in France, even in the person of its greatest
representative, Tchaikovsky, and has never won the same appreciation there as in Germany, where the exact opposite is the case. . . . Owing to this attitude shown by public opinion in Paris, the St. Petersburg composers during Diaghileff’s “Russian Season” had a much easier success than their Moscow colleagues, as, for instance, Rachmaninoff, because he was considered a follower of Tchaikovsky, and Scriabin, because his nebulous world-philosophy was not congenial to the sharp, crystal-clear intellect and the straightforward musical hedonism of the French.16

There is no gainsaying the importance of turn-of-the-century St. Petersburg and interwar Paris as crucibles for a distinct form of Russian modernism, yet their histories can overshadow other, equally important responses to modernity.

Rachmaninoff’s career is a case in point. The brief period he spent in St. Petersburg in the early 1880s was as unhappy as it was unproductive, and his relationship with the city was subsequently tainted by César Cui’s withering attack on his First Symphony. His relationship with Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes was equally fleeting and inconclusive.17 By contrast, Moscow proved to be a city in which Rachmaninoff not only established himself as the heir to Tchaikovsky, but also formed part of a younger generation of composer-pianists, most notably Nikolai Medtner and Aleksandr Scriabin. Broadly speaking, the myth of Moscow is that of a more traditional, more authentic, more conservative older sibling to the younger and more iconoclastic St. Petersburg, yet it too experienced its own form of modernity in the early twentieth century. With their strong investment in German Romantic idealism, tinged with decadence, messianism, and fin-de-siècle ennui, intellectual and artistic circles in Moscow fashioned Rachmaninoff’s pre-revolutionary works every bit as much as Western European and American interwar modernism shaped his émigré compositions. Writing of his First Symphony shortly after its disastrous premiere in St. Petersburg in March 1897, for instance, he confessed that “this Symphony, even if it is not decadent, as this word is normally used and understood, is really rather ‘new.’”18 To hear the First Symphony as an innovative work—even one in dialogue with aspects of decadence (as modernism was often called in Russia in the 1890s)—is a first step in seeing Rachmaninoff less through the prism of late Romanticism than through that of a nascent modernism associated above all with Moscow, and which was pursued yet further during the time he spent in Dresden between 1906 and 1909. As he stated in an interview that appeared shortly after his first American tour in 1909–10:
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While we must respect the traditions of the past, which for the most part are very intangible to us because they are only to be found in books, we must, nevertheless, not be bound down by convention. Iconoclasm is the law of artistic progress. All great composers and performers have built on the ruins of conventions that they themselves have destroyed.\(^{19}\)

Although that iconoclasm did not obviously manifest itself in Rachmaninoff’s art, it nonetheless opens up a new way of thinking about his place in twentieth-century music.

As with other volumes in the Bard Music Festival series, *Rachmaninoff and His World* does not aim to be a complete companion to the composer’s life and works. Instead, its three subsections and afterword explore his music by focusing on his interaction with the artistic and intellectual worlds in which he lived and worked. Throughout, the image that emerges is not that of a composer airily disengaged from contemporary debates, but one of a figure who reacted thoughtfully, creatively, and individually to a strikingly wide range of stimuli. His career was that of a busy, successful professional musician, shaped by the new cultural and social institutions that came into being in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century. He may have sought peace and isolation as a composer, but as a pianist and conductor, he traveled extensively throughout the Russian Empire, Western Europe, and North America, even before his emigration in 1917. The twenty-five and a half years he lived outside the land of his birth were just as dynamic and driven. His busy concert life took him to the most important cultural centers in Europe and the United States, as well as many smaller and more easily overlooked towns and cities. Interviews with the press allowed him to spread his renown with the large audiences for classical music that emerged between the wars, and recording offered new possibilities for cultivating his artistic celebrity. Keeping up with his extended family and circles of friends entailed lengthy journeys across countries and continents. And even if he was unable to return to his homeland, he maintained an energetic correspondence with those friends and colleagues who had remained behind. Despite his antipathy toward communism, he provided financial support to the Red Army during the Second World War, and his works—even those composed in emigration—came to enjoy a central place in the Soviet repertoire.

The volume’s opening section focuses primarily on cultural life in Moscow in the final decades of the Russian Empire. It was here that Rachmaninoff studied and first made his name, and where he developed into the musician—composer, pianist, and conductor—whom we know now. Peter Franklin’s essay—which ranges beyond Moscow to St.
Petersburg, Dresden, and even the composer’s émigré years—sets forth a reading of Rachmaninoff’s orchestral music that moves beyond his acknowledged debt to Tchaikovsky, finding instead parallels with Mahler and Reger, and proposing a genealogy of modernism that runs contrary to narratives associated with Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Rebecca Mitchell focuses on turn-of-the-century Moscow and its musical institutions, illustrating how Rachmaninoff—even while he never associated himself with any particular clique or movement, and shied away from the kind of manifestos and programmatic statements that were so characteristic of modernism—was a dynamic presence in the city. Mitchell’s appeal here is not, in fact, to artistic modernism, but to the broader and more productive concept of modernity, a term that captures the energetic transformation of urban life in early twentieth-century Russia. Mitchell’s reading of modernity is catholic and capacious, incorporating elite musical institutions (the Moscow Conservatory, Russian Music Society, private concert series), as well as facets of popular culture (gypsy singers, the café chantant). Similarly Marina Frolova-Walker emphasizes Rachmaninoff’s kinship with aspects of early twentieth-century culture that have not always figured in classic accounts of Russian modernism. Evoking the notion of the “middlebrow,” Frolova-Walker situates Rachmaninoff’s music at the intersection between high art and popular culture and proposes an interpretation of his songs that reveals affinities with the work of a number of early twentieth-century writers, many of them women, who have not always been accorded a place in the literary canon. This literary focus extends to my own close reading of the “Vocalise,” which has long stood as an archetypical example of Rachmaninoff’s characteristic lyricism, but which is here interpreted as a response to contemporary literary aesthetics.

The centrality of opera to the Russian musical canon is well attested, yet Rachmaninoff’s three one-act operas are unfamiliar to many music lovers and have often been seen as failures, even by sympathetic scholars. Emily Frey examines Rachmaninoff’s graduation piece, Aleko, demonstrating its subtle refraction and reconfiguration of Russian musical realism. Frey also illustrates how the opera encodes Rachmaninoff’s productive relationship with a number of turn-the-century Moscow’s leading theatrical innovators—Chaliapin, Nemirovich-Danchenko, and Stanislavsky. Caryl Emerson and Simon Morrison explore the pair of operas whose premiere Rachmaninoff himself conducted at Moscow’s Bolshoi Theatre in January 1906. As interpreted by Emerson, The Miserly Knight becomes not just the last of Pushkin’s “little tragedies” to be set to music (coming after Dargomyzhsky’s Stone Guest, Rimsky-Korsakov’s Mozart and Salieri, and Cui’s Feast in Time of Plague), but a commentary on the nature of creativity and the vocation of the artist in an era of increasing mercantilism. As well as its social and biographical relevance, The Miserly Knight
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also deals with the theology of sin. As such, it makes an ideal pairing with Francesco da Rimini, based on Dante’s Commedia, and constituting one of European culture’s most durable evocations of adulterous love. Morrison, like Emerson, notes the Wagnerian quality of the score, and shows Rachmaninoff’s evolving—and often innovative—approach to the musical treatment of eroticism.

Rachmaninoff’s experience of displacement after 1917 has given rise to a sense of him as the archetypal Russian émigré, and it is not hard to find evidence of his abiding attachment to his lost homeland. The music of this period has come to embody what Edward Said sees as the exile’s divided self:

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile’s life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sense of estrangement. The achievements of exiles are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind for ever.20

There are, though, other ways of hearing Rachmaninoff’s final works. Accordingly, this volume’s third section dwells less on a sense of loss than on the achievements of his American years (which began even before he settled in the United Stated in 1918). A selection of his interviews with the American press reveals him to have been adept at conveying a highly marketable image to his new audience, and belies a reputation for dour taciturnity (to one editor he coyly claimed: “I mostly keep my opinions to myself, and in consequence I am generally regarded as a silent man. So be it. In silence lies safety”).21 Steve Swayne’s study of the eighteenth variation from the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini reveals a knowing dialogue between Rachmaninoff’s own brand of lush Romanticism and aspects of interwar modernism (not least Schoenberg’s serial technique), as well as celebrating its evergreen emotional appeal. Christopher H. Gibbs and Marina Raku explore contrasting aspects of Rachmaninoff’s reception around the mid-century. Gibbs focuses on the festival of Rachmaninoff’s music that was given by his beloved Philadelphia Orchestra in 1939, which represents the culmination of his canonization as the most popular living classical composer in America. Raku reminds us that despite his emigration, Rachmaninoff enjoyed equal popularity in the Soviet Union, and that his music came to represent a point of continuity between the
nineteenth-century Russian classics and the aspirations of socialist realism, both as a musical style, and as a form of cultural appreciation. Leon Botstein’s essay traces Rachmaninoff’s career as a one of a number composer-pianists to have brought the grand tradition of European art music to modern America, contrasting his legacy with the very different styles of Busoni and Paderewski.

Published to coincide with the 2022 Bard Music Festival, *Rachmaninoff and His World* anticipates the celebrations of the hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the composer’s birth in 1873 (not to mention the eightieth anniversary of his death in 1943). Viewed from the vantage point of the present day, Rachmaninoff seems ever less a relic of the nineteenth century, and more and more the quintessential composer of the first half of the twentieth. After all, scholarship has moved on from the tenets of high modernism that once denigrated or ignored altogether composers such as Rachmaninoff on the grounds of their supposed conservatism and commercial appeal. Equally, we have learned to be less anxious about the enormous pleasure that his music affords and to celebrate—or at least not dismiss—its enduring expressive appeal. Each of the essays here reveals a reflective, undogmatic individual, who saw his music not as a vehicle for conveying a nationality, an ideology, an aesthetic, or a philosophy, but as the articulation of his own, highly personal and irreducible emotional constitution. As Rachmaninoff himself wrote in December 1941:

> In my own compositions, no conscious effort has been made to be original, or Romantic, or Nationalistic, or anything else. I write down on paper the music I hear within me, as naturally as possible. I am a Russian composer, and the land of my birth has influenced my temperament and outlook. My music is the product of my temperament, and so it is Russian music; I never consciously attempted to write Russian music, or any other kind of music. I have been strongly influenced by Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov; but I have never, to the best of my knowledge, imitated anyone. What I try to do, when writing down my music, is to make it say simply and directly that which is in my heart when I am composing. If there is love there, or bitterness, or sadness, or religion, these moods become a part of my music, and it becomes either beautiful or bitter or sad or religious.22
NOTES


9. Ibid.


12. Ibid., 244.


17. Rachmaninoff’s only brush with Diaghilev was in 1907, when he took part in the first of the impresario’s Russian seasons in Paris, conducting his cantata, Spring, and taking the solo part in his Second Piano Concerto. Much later, his Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini was choreographed by Mikhail Fokine and staged in London in 1939 and New York in 1940, long after the novelty of Diaghilev’s enterprise had faded into something more conventional.


