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Sergei Rachmaninoff and American Press at the Turn of the 1920s and 1930s

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Abstract. The turn of the 1920s and 1930s marks an important changes in the creative destiny of Sergei Rachmaninoff. The problems that arose then were clearly reflected in he publications of the American press and in the reaction of Rachmaninoff to them. During this period, several important events and circumstances came together for him. They can be combined into several groups. The first of them is associated with an attempt to boycott the composer's work in the USSR after the publication in 1931 in the USA of a collective letter signed by Rachmaninoff protesting against Stalin's repressions; the second is determined by the changed relationship between Rachmaninoff the pianist and the audiences, with potential and actual visitors to his concerts; the third is the ambiguous reaction of the US musical community to the premiers of new works created by Rachmaninoff after a long composer's silence. All three groups of problems

Translated by Dr. Anton A. Rovner

are revealed based on documentary sources – articles in the American press (little known or commented for the first time) and published Rachmaninoff's letters. Conflicting assessments of the performing arts and composer's works of the highlighted period can be eloquent evidence of a sharp turn in the Rachmaninoff's musical activities, of his emergence to a new level of thinking, unexpected and for the time being incomprehensible to his contemporaries. All the examined aspects of Rachmaninoff's relationship with American press of the late 1920s and early 1930s indicate an important milestone in his creative destiny. For the first time in Russia, the Appendix to the article contains the full text of the letter signed by Rachmaninov to Rabindranath Tagore.

Keywords: Sergei Rachmaninoff, turn of the 1920s and 1930s, American press, boycott, performing arts, composer's oeuvre

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История музыки

Научная статья

С. В. Рахманинов и американская пресса рубежа 1920–1930-х годов

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Аннотация. Рубеж 1920–1930-х годов обозначил важный поворот в творческой судьбе С. В. Рахманинова. Возникшие тогда проблемы нашли яркое отражение в публикациях американской прессы и в реакции на них самого Рахманинова. В этот период сошлись несколько важных для него событий и обстоятельств. Их можно объединить в несколько групп. Первая из них связана с попыткой бойкота творчества композитора в СССР после публикации в 1931 году в США подписанного Рахманиновым коллективного письма с протестом против сталинских репрессий; вторая определяется осложнившимися отношениями Рахманинова-пианиста с публикой, с потенциальными и реальными посетителями его концертов; третья обусловлена неоднозначной реакцией музыкальной общественности США на премьеры новых произведений, созданных Рахманиновым после долгого композиторского молчания. Все три обозначенные группы проблем раскрываются в опоре на документальные источники — статьи в американской прессе (малоизвестные и впервые освещаемые) и опубликованные письма Рахманинова. Противоречивые оценки исполнительского искусства и композиторского творчества выделенного периода могут быть красноречивыми свидетельствами резкого поворота в поисках Рахманинова, выхода его к качественно новому уровню мышления, во многом неожиданному и до поры непонятному для его современников. Все рассмотренные аспекты взаимоотношений Рахманинова с американской прессой конца 1920-х — начала 1930-х годов указывают на важный рубеж в его творческой судьбе. В Приложении к статье впервые в России приводится полный текст подписанного Рахманиновым письма к Р. Тагору.

Ключевые слова: Сергей Рахманинов, рубеж 1920–1930-х годов, американская пресса, бойкот, исполнительское искусство, композиторское творчество

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The turn of the two interwar decades signified an important turn in Sergei Vassilyevich Rachmaninoff's artistic destiny. The problems that arose then found their bright reflection in the publications of the American press and the composer's own reactions to them. This period saw the conjoining of several events and circumstances that may be united into several groups.

The first of them was the attempt of boycotting the composer's music in the USSR after the publication in the 1931 in the USA of the collective letter protesting Stalin's repressive policies signed by him; the second was the complexification of the relations of Rachmaninoff the pianist with the public, with the potential and real attendees of his concerts; the third was the ambiguous reaction of the musical community to Rachmaninoff's new compositions created by him after a lengthy silence. We also must not forget the political situation, which exacerbated particularly during those landmark years, which expressed themselves with the beginning of the harsh economic crisis in America and Europe, the triumph of the National Socialist Party in Germany that lead to Adolf Hitler's totalitarian regime, as well as the sharp increase of repressions in Stalin's Soviet Union (1929 was declared to be the year of "the great turning point," and it brought both an economic surge and countless human casualties). All of these circumstances are connected with a certain unobvious but real logic, having also defined a number of profound peculiarities of Rachmaninoff's compositions of the late 1920s and early 1930s. The attempt to comprehend the formed "topical junction" through the prism of the responses of the American press is what comprises the aim of the presented article.

The Letter to Tagore

The story of the "boycott" of Rachmaninoff's music in the early 1930s is quite well-known, it was illuminated numerous times in the literature¹ (see: [1; 2; 3]).

¹ See Bryantseva, V. N. (1976). *S. V. Rakhmaninov [Sergei Rachmaninoff]*. Sovetsky kompozitor (p. 645), Nikitin, B. S. (2008). *Sergei Rakhmaninov. Dve zhizni [Sergei Rachmaninoff. Two Lives]*. Klassika XXI (p. 208).

It suffices to remind of the most important. Everything began with the publication in the American newspaper, *The New York Times*: on January 12, 1931 this periodical published an open letter signed by Rachmaninoff (along with Ivan Ivanovich Ostromyslensky and Ilya Lvovich Tolstoy). In its turn, the letter was a response to a set of interviews given by Rabindranath Tagore, who had visited the Soviet Union and responded enthusiastically to the successes of popular education in the land of the Soviets. Against the background of what had already been known beyond the confines of the USSR about Stalin's political repressions, Tagore's words of praise seemed to be insulting and false. The letter written by Ostromyslensky-Rachmaninoff-Tolstoy was composed in harsh expressions that reflected the irreconcilable position of the representatives of the Russian emigration: "Much to our surprise, he has given praise to the activities of the Bolsheviki, and seemed rather delighted with their achievements in the field of public education. Strangely, not a word did he utter on the horrors perpetrated by OGPU in particular."²

Let us leave aside the motives and the circumstances of Rachmaninoff's participation in this action — this theme is too specialized and too delicate, considering his long-established cautious attitude to any various public declarations and interviews in the press. According to Philip Ross Bullock's fair observation, this attitude had already been formed by the time of the artist's American debuts in 1909–1910: "...His first American tour revealed to him the potential benefits of using the interview format to cultivate his celebrity, while still guarding his deeply felt sense of privacy." [4, p. 183]. It is also well-known that Rachmaninoff possessed a sufficient amount of practical hold to consider the possible reaction of the public and the press when planning his concert tours (see about this [5]).

However, there are grounds for considering that Rachmaninoff's position in this incident was firm and conscious. Two months later, the newspaper, *New York Herald Tribune* from March 20 of the same year reported that Rachmaninoff's signature stood under "The anti-Soviet article' referred to in the dispatch may be either of two communications signed by Mr. Rachmaninoff published last January. One was [...] an appeal to the State department asking the American people to refrain from buying Soviet goods. It was signed by 210 prominent Russians here and abroad, including many scientists, statesmen, musicians, artists, clergymen and industrialists."³

² Ostromislensky, I., Rachmaninoff, S., & Tolstoy, I. (1931, January 15). Tagore on Russia. The "Circle of Russian Culture" Challenges Some of His Statements To the Editor of New York Times. *The New York Times*. Here and further down the quotations from the American press are given from the newspaper clippings collected by Sofia Satina and donated by her to the Library of Congress of the USA. The copies of some of the clippings were passed by Satina to the Russian National Museum of Music in Moscow, where they have been preserved since then (RNMM. Fund 18. Nos. 1684–1775, Nos. 1776–1832, etc.). The greatest amount of the copies of the clippings used in the article have been provided by the author by Keenan Reesor. All of the translations from English into Russian have been carried out by the author of this article. The newspaper pages are indicated in those cases when they are reflected in the clippings.

³ Anonym, (1931, March 20). Rachmaninoff Works Boycotted by Russians as Reactionary. *New York Herald Tribune*.

The reactions of the Soviet society to the political statements to which Rachmaninoff turned out to be involved in has also been long well-known and expounded in the works of Marina Grigoryevna Raku [1; 2]. On May 5 and 6, 1931 English conductor Albert Coates toured Moscow and Leningrad, and under his direction the orchestra and the chorus of the Bolshoi Theater performed Gustav Holst's orchestral suite *The Planets* and Rachmaninoff's poem *The Bells*. This concert was used as an occasion to remind the Russian émigré of his "attacks" on the USSR.

In March 1931 the staff of the Moscow Conservatory presented a condemnatory statement, after which in the Leningrad Conservatory the following resolution was passed:

The staff of the VLKSM [Communist Youth League] of the Leningrad Conservatory, after having discussed the summons of the general assembly of the Moscow Higher Music School about declaring a boycott to the works of the White émigré composer Rachmaninoff, in connection with his actions in the foreign press with calumnious claims about compulsory work in the USSR, aligns itself in full to the proposition of boycotting Rachmaninoff's music, which reflects the decadent moods of the petty bourgeoisie, an art that is especially adversarial in the conditions of the hard fought class struggle on the musical front.⁴

These calls were echoed by certain other newspapers and journals. The outcome of history is also well-known: the "boycott" did not last long — already in 1933 the works of the disgraced composer began to return to the concert halls and the stands of the music stores.

The news about the scandal reached Rachmaninoff very quickly, about two weeks after the publications of the "incriminating articles" in the Soviet newspapers. On March 27 he was supposed to have finished his tour of the east coast of the USA, in Brooklyn, Connecticut, and when and his spouse accompanying him "...crossed the continent to complete the season on the east coast, they heard most unwelcome news from Moscow."⁵

We can only guess about Rachmaninoff's reaction to these news. Rachmaninoff never made any public statements or gave any interviews. However, the newspaper reporters, in all likelihood, waited for his response with impatience, and, not having received any from him, attempted to "simulate" it, relying on not very veracious sources.

In an item titled *Dangerous Music*, the newspaper, *The New York Times* reported on March 29, 1931: "Having silenced the Moscow bells, our Russian comrades have now done what they could to still the music reminiscent of them. The Moscow and Leningrad conservatories have boycotted the works of Sergei

⁴ Anonym, (1931, March 15). Boykot Rachmaninovu [A Boycott of Rachmaninoff]. *Krasnaya gazeta. Evening edition*, 63 (2730), p. 3.

⁵ Bertensson, S., & Leyda, J. (1956). With the Assistance of Sophia Satina. In *Sergei Rachmaninoff. A Lifetime in Music*. New York University Press, p. 273.

Wassilievitch Rachmaninoff, late of Moscow and now at 505 West End Avenue, New York.”⁶

Further on, the author gives a verbatim quotation of the Soviet “comrades”: “There must be immense advertising value in the Soviet appraisal of Rachmaninoff compositions as “reactionary and particularly dangerous to conditions in the acute class struggle on the musical front,” but Rachmaninoff is indifferent to notoriety.”⁷

With the absence of fresh statements from the composer, the journalist cites an olden story recounted by Rachmaninoff in his interview from 1921⁸ and republished numerous times in Russian.⁹ This was the story of Tchaikovsky’s reaction to the exceptional popularity of his music. In Rachmaninoff’s transmission, Tchaikovsky’s comment sounds as follows: “Now I am quite indifferent.” These words are repeated in the newspaper, but already in connection with the latest events — as an imaginary response to the accusation brought to Rachmaninoff: “‘Reactionary and particularly dangerous’. ‘I am quite indifferent.’”¹⁰

The *New York Herald Tribune* in the previously cited publication, went even farther in conjecturing Rachmaninoff’s response, citing certain nameless friends of the composer’s: “Mr. Rachmaninoff, in accordance with his custom of refusing to discuss political subjects, declined in New York last night to comment on the Soviet boycott. It was understood from his friends, however, that he had said that he was “rather proud” to be the object of the Moscow activity.”¹¹

A more veracious account of the affair may be found in the report published in the journal *Syracuse Herald* on March 21, 1931:

Wrestling with a pair of rubbers, a woollen scarf and an overcoat, Sergei Rachmaninoff, the great Russian pianist and composer, flung out a brief ‘Proud of it’ when questioned on what he thought of having his compositions banned... and thereupon beat a hasty retreat from his dressing room after a brilliant recital at Constitution Hall. ‘Why shouldn’t I be?’ he added. (Quoted by: [3, p. 149])

Despite the dubious quality of the sources, the cited statement by Rachmaninoff seems to be quite plausible. And it may already be asserted with all certitude: he could not have remained indifferent to yet another action of repression in his native land, all the more so, because it concerned him, in particular.

⁶ Anonym, (1931, March 29). *Dangerous Music. New York Times.*

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Anonym, (1921, April). *The Musical Observer*, pp.11–12.

⁹ Apetyan, Z. A. (Ed.). (2023). *Vospominaniya. Stat'i. Intervyu. Pis'ma* [Memoirs. Articles. Interviews. Letters]. In Rachmaninoff S. V. *Literaturnoe nasledie* [Literary Heritage]. (Vols. 1–3, Vol. 2). Muzyka, p. 74.

¹⁰ Anonym, (1931, March 29). *Dangerous Music. New York Times.*

¹¹ Anonym, (1931, March 20). *Rachmaninoff Works Boycotted by Russians as Reactionary. New York Herald Tribune.*

“...However, the reports are sour”

The spirit of the landmark time manifested itself not only in the described story, but also had an impact on the relationship of Rachmaninoff the pianist with the audience of his listeners and his critics. Naturally, his reputation as an outstanding performer remained on high standing, without any doubt. His performances were most frequently accompanied by effusive ovations on the part of the public, sometimes morphing into veritable mass demonstrations. However, from 1927 and up to the early 1930s Rachmaninoff's letters presented more and more often lamentations of half-empty halls, cold reception and disapproving responses on the part of the journalists.

Rachmaninoff sense acutely the reaction of the auditorium and was by no means indifferent to the reports of the press. Judging by certain slipups in his letters, his attitude towards the newspaper reports preserved a healthy balance of steadfast attention and an independence of self-assessment. In one of his letters (from April 3, 1928) he confesses: “As for the reviews about me, I do not know whether they should be sent here! It is best if you preserve them for yourselves. All of these reports have never been very interesting for me throughout all of my life. Maybe, it is because, more often than not, they were negative.”¹² Another letter (from February 2, 1931) reflects the combination of self confidence and the apparent concernment about the tone of the newspaper reports so characteristic of Rachmaninoff:

I played well, and I am very pleased with myself. However, the reports are sour. And what could this mean? What did I do to them? After all, ten years ago, when I played approximately ten times worse, the tone of the newspapers was ten times better. There is something here unfathomable for me for my understanding. And, most importantly, I cannot change myself, nor do I want to.¹³

This acknowledgement presents an important testimony of the change in the attitude towards Rachmaninoff the pianist, which he himself observed.

It was particularly during those years of crisis in Rachmaninoff's artistic career, for the first time after his departure from Russia, there arises the sharply paradoxical conjunction of triumphal successes and, simultaneously, sharply negative judgments of his performance. I shall cite only several most revealing examples of this paradox. The excesses in the behavior of the exuberant audiences during Rachmaninoff's concerts are demonstrated most vividly by one of the reviews from 1932. It appeared after his concert in Chicago on January 14. The critic (Herman Devries) describes the “football” frenzy of the listeners who packed the hall, despite the catastrophic downpour of rain:

¹² Apetyan, Z. A. (Ed.). (2023). Rachmaninov S. V. Pis'mo k N. V. Korotnevvoy ot 3 aprelya 1928 g [Letter to N. V. Korotneva from April 3, 1928]. In Rachmaninov S. V. *Literaturnoe nasledie* [Literary Heritage]. (Vols. 1–3, Vol. 2). Muzyka, p. 208.

¹³ Apetyan, Z. A. (Ed.). (2023). Pis'mo k E. I. Somovu ot 2 fevralya 1931 g [Letter to E. I. Somov from February 2, 1931]. In Rachmaninov S. V. *Literaturnoe nasledie* [Literary Heritage]. (Vols. 1–3, Vol. 2). Muzyka, p. 270.

While the city was drowned in one of the worst rainstorms ever witnessed here, hundreds of usually sane persons were shouting “bravo”, stamping their feet, waving programs, and generally behaving like a crowd of frantic college youths at a football triumph of their alma mater. And this is Chicago, the much discussed city by the lake. This audience is made up of Chicagoans. These people are not from Marseilles, Montpellier or Bordeaux, not from Spain or Italy; they are Americans. Thus Rachmaninoff changed more Americans into music-mad, hero-mad men and women, forgetting all save that they were in the presence of genius. <...> Let it ain!¹⁴

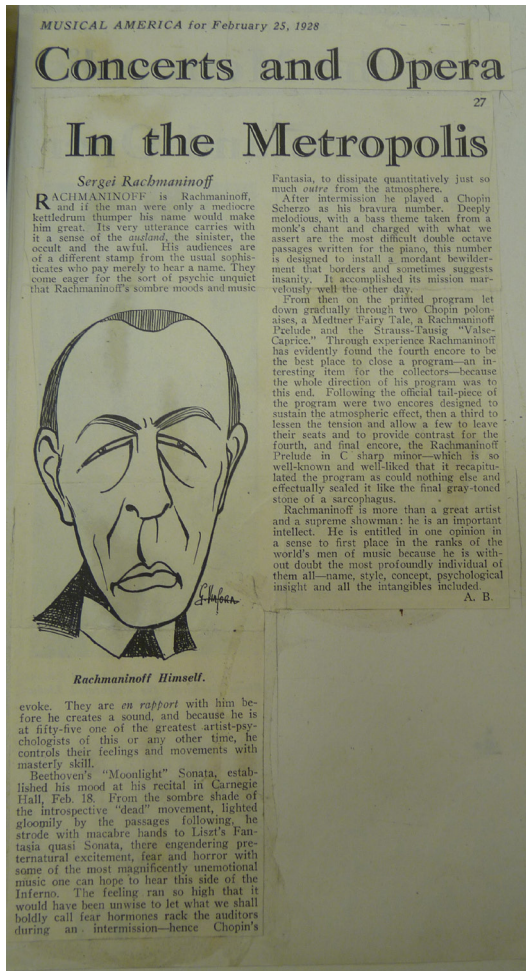


Illustration 1.
Musical America Magazine page
(February 25, 1928) with a review
of Rachmaninov's performance
on February 18 in New York
at Carnegie Hall

No less expressive is the critic's summary: "No one born will ever play as he did. No pianist to come will ever equal this Olympian as he reveals the utmost beauties of the pianoforte. His concerto is merely one-millionth of his genius, his performance only a single offspring of his tremendous brain and technic."¹⁵ More restrained, but quite high assessments appeared in these years in other publications (see *Illustration 1*).

On the opposite pole of the reports is the review of the concert in New York on February 19, 1927, in which the author (Olga Samaroff) observes with a distinct sense of disenchantment: "Again, as a pianist, Rachmaninoff seldom displays in my opinion the emotional warmth and sensuous color so characteristic of his own creative muse."¹⁶ In the subsequent years, such assessments acquired a greater amount of harshness.

In the newspaper, *Detroit Evening News* from February 6, 1929 Ralph Holmes wrote:

Something seems to have come over Rachmaninoff these past few seasons. Not only did he take to smiling a couple of years ago, but he has definitely joined the ranks of the pianistic pyrotechnicians, and in Orchestra Hall Tuesday evening gave a performance that positively dazzling. Whereas

¹⁴ Devries, H. (1932, January 15). Football Cheers Greet. Rachmaninoff in Orchestra Hall. *The Chicago American*, p. 26.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Samaroff, O. (1927, February 20). Sold-Out House for Rachmaninoff's First Recital at Carnegie Hall. *Evening Post*.

we used to look forward to a Rachmaninoff recital as an emotional experience, now we must remember this last one as hardly more than an exhibition of glittering brilliance, with some pretty sentiment for trimming. Can it be that the gloomy-looking Russian who led so often into realms of mystery and imagination has become Americanized and gone rotarian?¹⁷ Or has he been reading the notices of his fellow countryman, Brailowsky, who is so lavishly praised for his cleverness, and decided to remind the public that he, too, knows all the tricks and has 10 fingers as nimble as any one's?¹⁸ (see *Illustration 2*).

Most likely, the most devastating criticism, coming from the famous critic Edward Cashing, appeared in the newspaper, *The Brooklyn Eagle* after the concert on March 27, 1931:

...despite his classic impersonality that is one of its most striking characteristics, his art reflects the fluctuations of his moods to a degree not observable in the performances of pianists equally gifted, equally accomplished. When he is not at his best, as was the case last evening, he can be very dull. His emotional detachment then is translated into terms of indifference, and one feels that Mr. Rachmaninoff has neither head nor heart for this task; nothing is expressed in his playing but weariness and lassitude of spirit. He is sufficiently the master of his instrument, sufficiently the musician always to play brilliantly, in a sense effectively; neither his technique nor his sense of values, of proportion, of style deserts him, but his pianism becomes spiritually, emotionally barren, conveys to us little or nothing of meaning of the music, seem to us a mere repetition of interpretative formulae, devoid of conviction on Mr. Rachmaninoff's part.¹⁹

Naturally, the paradox imprinted in the cited utterances requires a degree of comprehension — at least, of the hypothetical variety. Both the exuberant and the scathingly negative reports came from authoritative reviewers, frequently well-known musicians, and were published in respectable editions. The instigator and the object of the attacks of the critics, as can be seen from the quoted letter, did not find any explanations of the resultant polarization of opinions of his art.

In Sergei Bertensson's and Jay Leida's book²⁰ [6] the conjecture is put forward that the negative reviews were aroused by a real creative decline in connection with the Soviet "boycott." The selfsame authors also mention another possible reason for this: the neurological pain in the right temple. However, the "sour reports," just as the neurological pains, appeared before the attacks of the Soviet press and the "unsuccessful concert" about which the critic writes. Nonetheless, it is possible that the impact from the boycott and the illness also played their role. Still another factor should also not be excluded: the inconceivable compaction of the composer's concert schedule, presuming almost daily performances with transferrals between different

¹⁷ A rotarian is a member of the American club of businessmen called the *Rotary Club*.

¹⁸ Holmes, R. (1929, February 6). Rachmaninoff Joins Ranks of Pyrotechnicians. *Detroit Evening News*.

¹⁹ Bertensson, S., Leyda, J., & Satina, S. (1956). *Rachmaninoff. A Lifetime in Music*. New York University Press, p. 273.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 464.

cities, required an economy of his strength, requiring him at times to make use of mangled techniques, brought to the level of automatism (which the penetrative listeners and critics could not avoid observing).

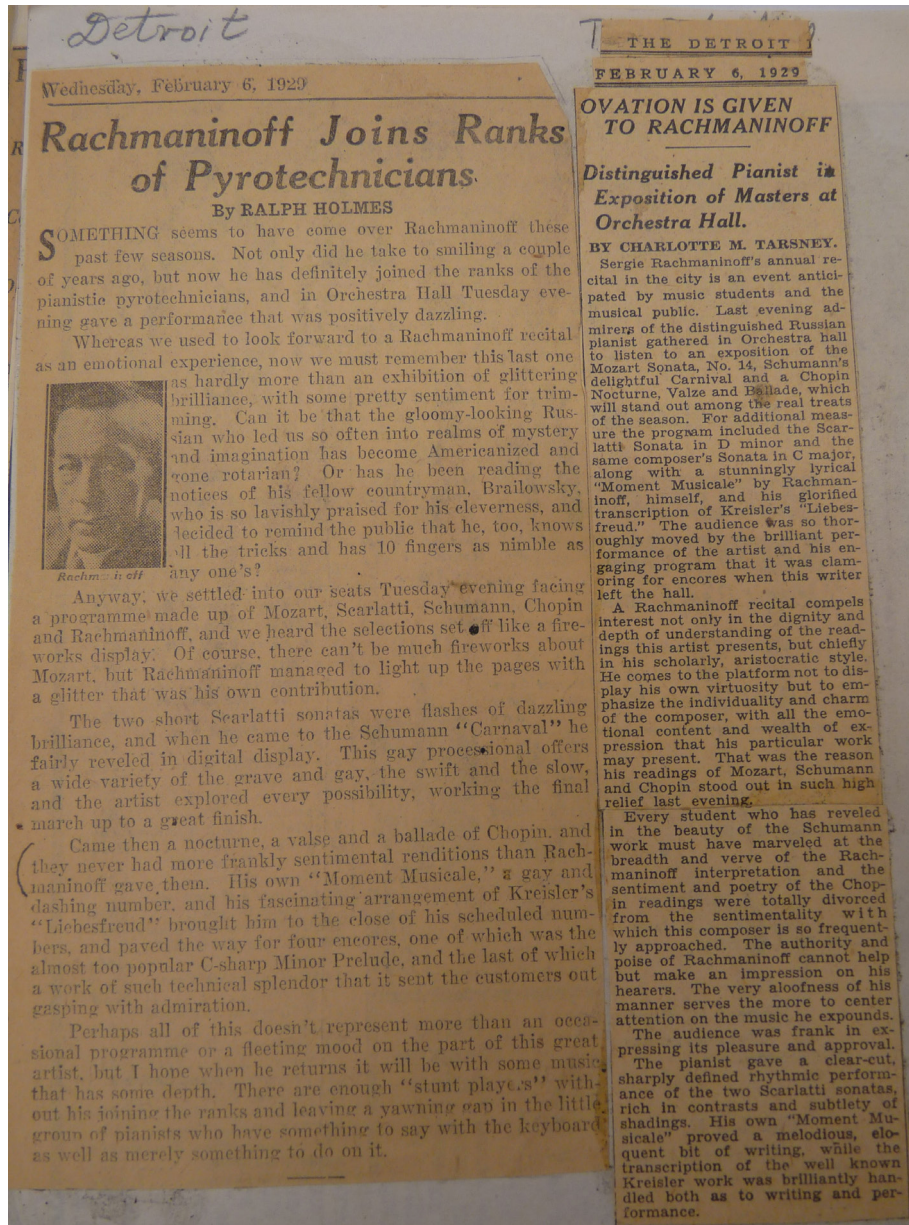


Illustration 2.

Detroit Evening News page (for February 6, 1929)

with Ralph Holmes' review of the concert Rachmaninoff (February 5, 1929 in Detroit)

And still the most likely explanation is that, particularly during those years, Rachmaninoff noticeably modified his style of performance, which became more rational and harsh, which corresponded quite well to the spirit of the time. In the letter from February 2, 1931, he asserts that: "ten years ago [...] [he] played approximately ten times worse...". The epithet "worse" could be understood as "differently," moreover, "approximately ten times." The few gramophone recordings known to us do not allow us to assess this

with certitude. However, it is possible that a certain part of the audience, to which the journalists also pertained, felt a certain amount of satiation of the immutable perfection of Rachmaninoff's piano playing. The ears, having tired themselves of this perfection, ceased to discern the work of the performer's soul and intellect in it.

"This [...] is not the music of the future"

The composer's new works were perceived with an especially acute interest. The public had long since accepted and learned to love Rachmaninoff's previous compositions — among the favorites were the *Second* and the *Third Piano Concertos* and, of course, the famous *Prelude in C-sharp minor*. A considerable amount of time had passed since the time of their creation, which also brought changes in the destiny of the composer, as well as his nine-year-long compositional silence and his harsh aesthetical fracture in all of the art of the 1920s.

In 1926, having ceased his concert performances, Rachmaninoff returned to his compositional activities. The *Fourth Piano Concerto* and the *Three Russian Songs* for chorus, which appeared during the same year (the autograph of the concerto bears the inscription of "January – August 25" 1926, the *Three Russian Songs* were completed on December 25 of the selfsame year), open up the period of interest for us. The *Variations on the Theme of Corelli* for piano, composed in 1931, fit this category, as well. These compositions obviously form a triad, which discernably differ from the later triad of the large-scale works, which are comprised of the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* (1934), the *Third Symphony* (1936) and the *Symphonic Dances* (1940).

The musicians from the composer's closest milieu immediately and unequivocally highly evaluated the *Fourth Piano Concerto* and the *Three Russian Songs*. Among them was composer Nikolai Karlovich Medtner, conductor Leopold Stokowski, and pianist Joseph Hoffmann. Both compositions enjoyed a considerable amount of success among the public, however, the assessments of the critics were, in the best cases, lukewarm.

While the negative responses to the performances of Rachmaninoff the pianist still comprise exceptions from the overall stream of praises, it is difficult to find unequivocally positive evaluations in the cases of the composer's new works.

After the concert of March 22, 1927 in New York, the observer of the newspaper, *The World* Samuel Chotzinoff wrote:

When Mr. Rachmaninoff last night launched into his "Fourth" concerto [...] the first theme, after a few introductory measures, seemed like an assurance that the eminent Russian was only taking up the thread where he had left off, all seemed so right and true for the moment. Here were the same characteristics, the vaulted architecture of phrase, the undercurrent of romantic sadness, the harmonic solidity. But as the movement progressed the artistic tension began slowly to relax.²¹

²¹ Chotzinoff, S. (1927, March 23). Music at Carnegie Hall the Philadelphia Orchestra. *The World*.

Even less satisfaction was aroused for the critic from the next two movements:

...But the melody of the largo of the new concerto was not even characteristically Rachmaninoff. It was reminiscent, but only of Schumann's piano concerto, the opening theme of which appeared in the Rachmaninoff like a pale emanation of itself. The last movement had even fewer moments of inspiration than the preceding two, and left one with the impression that a lot was said, but not of any particular importance. Of course, Mr. Rachmaninoff played his Concerto superbly...²²

A harsh report of the selfsame concerto was given in the newspaper, *New York Herald Tribune* by Lawrence Gilman:

For all this somewhat naïve camouflage of whole-tone scales and occasionally dissonant harmony, Mr. Rachmaninoff's new concerto (his Fourth, in the key of G minor) remains as essentially nineteenth century as if Tchaikovsky had signed it. Somber it is, at time, but it never exhibits the fathomless melancholy of such authentic masters of tragical speech as Mussorgsky. There is a Mendelssohnian strain in Rachmaninoff which relates him more intimately to the salon than to the steppes; and this strain comes out in his new concerto, as it does in all his music, sooner or later. The new work is neither so expressive nor so effective as its famous companion in C minor.²³

But the most scathing report turned out to be that of Pitts Sanborn:

The concerto in question is an interminable, loosely knit hodgepodge of this and that, all the way from Liszt to Puccini, from Chopin to Tchaikovsky. Even Mendelssohn enjoys a passing compliment. The orchestral scoring has the richness of nougat and piano part glitters with innumerable stock tricks and figurations. As music it is now weepily sentimental, now of an elfin prettiness, now swelling toward bombast in fluent orotundity. It is neither futuristic music nor music of the future. Its past was a present in Continental capitals half a century ago.²⁴

Among the few restrainedly sympathetic responses, mention should be made of Leonard Liebling's review. It was the first to have observed the influence of jazz on Rachmaninoff's late music:

In the finale, the composer exercised his imagination mainly in rhythm, and one thinks to note therein the influence of Rachmaninoff's continual residence in America since 1918. Certain it is that the pulsing energy of the music, its complex metric insistences and crossings suggest more than nodding acquaintance with — oh, impious thought! — with our native jazz. A Russianized jazz, to be sure, and a highly idealized jazz besides. Jazz by Rachmaninoff is a Jovian matter, however, and it functioned irresistibly. The whirling, whizzing, clattering, climacteric ending swept the hearers into overpowering response. They recalled the gravely pleased composer again and again. The pianism of Rachmaninoff was as admirable and effective as always.²⁵

²² Ibid.

²³ Gilman, L. (1927, March 22). An All-Russian Program by the Philadelphia Orchestra. *New York Herald Tribune*.

²⁴ Sanborn, P. (1927, March 22). Rachmaninoff Preludes. Russian Composer-Pianist Opens Quaker's Concert with New Concerto. *Telegram*.

²⁵ Liebling, L. (1927, March 23). Stokowsky gives New Compositions by Rachmaninoff. *New York American*.

In the opinion of the majority of the critics, the *Three Russian Songs*, which were performed during that same evening, distinguished themselves in a favorable light against the background of the almost unsuccessful *Concerto*. Richard Stokes, the observer of the newspaper, *The Evening World*, presented this in the guise of a battle scene:

Like Napoleon at Marengo, Sergei Rachmaninoff yesterday evening at Carnegie Hall turned the most disastrous route of his career into decisive victory. The opening attack was made with a new concerto for pianoforte and orchestra — No. 4, in G Minor, Op. 40. It came reeling back from the charge in disorder and defeat. <...> After the intermission a chorus of twenty contraltos and basses took its place with the orchestra and proceeded to redeem the catastrophe with Mr. Rachmaninoff's three latest compositions. These are settings for voices and orchestra of Russian folk songs entitled.²⁶

The selfsame critic, not having observed any merits whatsoever in the new concerto, made an important observation, not devoid of grounds, regarding the other novelty of the evening:

It was not only Rachmaninoff at his best, with all his command of emotional modulation and rhythmic intricate. It was also a new Rachmaninoff. His vocabulary enriched by many inventions of modernistic music — a Rachmaninoff far removed from the one who a few years ago boasted of being as fascinated as Haydn.²⁷

The difficult turn of the decades made its imprint on the fate of another new work of Rachmaninoff — the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli* for piano opus 42 (completed on June 19 and performed for the first time on October 22, 1931). The reception on the part of the audiences and the critics was stably chilly. We are able to receive an impression about this only through one, albeit, very characteristic quotation from the newspaper, *New York Herald Tribune*:

Of Mr. Rachmaninoff's variations on a Corelli Theme, it is difficult to speak with enthusiasm. They will scarcely replace Corelli's own violin variations on the same subject. Expertly written to display the player consummate mastery of his instrument, they bring little, which the composer has not already said more felicitously in his preludes and other works.²⁸

Rachmaninoff himself, in his letter to Medtner, described with bitter humor the listeners' reaction to the new composition:

I am sending you my new Variations... I have also never played them in full. At the same time, I was guided by the audience's coughs. As the coughs increased, I skipped the next variation. If there was no cough, I played everything in order. On one concert, — I do not remember where, — in a small town they coughed so much that I played only

²⁶ Stokes, R. L. (1927, March 23). Music. *The Evening World*.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Bohm, J. D. (1931, November 7). Rachmaninoff Plays to Throng at Carnegie Hall. *The New York Herald Tribune*.

10 variations (out of twenty). The record set up by me was 18 variations (in New York). Still, I hope that you will play all of them and that you would not “cough.”²⁹

It must be acknowledged that the apprehensive and even negative attitude of the press frequently accompanied the premieres of Rachmaninoff's large-scale works. Thus, the *Second Piano Concerto* was accepted lukewarmly in Vienna in 1903, and even in Russia it was not appraised immediately (see [6]), and contradictory evaluations accompanied the first performance of the *Third Symphony* in 1936 (see [7]). However, the exceeding cruelty of most of the responses to Rachmaninoff's oeuvres created outside of Russia compels us to remember, first of all, the history of the failure of his *First Symphony*. At that time, in 1897, for the young composer the merciless criticism of his favorite work created by him became a real tragedy, the result of which was a lengthy heavy depression. Now, at the turn of the 1920s and the 1930s, the musician who had been accepted throughout the entire world was undoubtedly less vulnerable for unjust evaluations. Although we are not in possession of veracious testimonials of his reactions to them, it appears in all likelihood that he preserved the attributes of impassivity and certitude in himself. Nonetheless, one cannot do otherwise but observe that the compositions of this crisis period were rarely performed by Rachmaninoff later, while the *Fourth Piano Concerto* in its initial version was not performed by him at all after the premiere performances of 1927³⁰. The *Variations on a Theme of Corelli* were included in the repertoires of his solo concerts only during the 1931–1932 and 1932–1933 and were never performed by Rachmaninoff himself ever after that.

It follows from all of this...

The responses cited from the American press make it possible to assess the complex and ambiguous position of Rachmaninoff in the musical world of the USA at the turn of the 1920s and the 1930s. The reaction of the journalists to the attempt of boycott of Rachmaninoff's music in the USSR confirms the persisting unwillingness intrinsic to him to comment these events publicly. The contradictory assessments of his performance on the piano and of his compositional output of the highlighted period may be eloquent testimonials of the sharp turn in Rachmaninoff's musical search, his arrival at a qualitatively new level of musical thinking, in many ways unexpected and until a certain time period incomprehensible for his contemporaries. All the examined aspects of Rachmaninoff's interactions with the American press of the late 1920s and early 1930s indicated at an important turning point in his artistic destiny.

²⁹ Apetyan, Z. A. (Ed.). (2023). Pis'mo k N. K. Metneru ot 21 dekabrya 1931 g. [Letter to Nikolai Medtner from December 21, 1931]. In Rachmaninov S. V. *Literaturnoe nasledie [Literary Heritage]* (Vols. 1–3, Vol. 2). Muzyka, p. 294.

³⁰ The *Fourth Piano Concerto* in the respective different versions was performed by Rachmaninoff himself: in 1929 in London, in 1930 in The Hague, Amsterdam, Paris and Berlin, in October and November 1941 in Philadelphia, Washington, Baltimore, New York and Chicago.

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Appendix

Tagore on Russia

The “Circle of Russian Culture” Challenges Some of His Statements
To the Editor of New York Times:

The “Circle of Russian Culture”, the aim of which is to foster intellectual intercourse among the Russian immigrants in New York feels compelled to comment on a recent interview given by Rabindranath Tagore.

He visited Russia, and many of his statements concerning that country have appeared in different periodical, both in this country and elsewhere. Much to our surprise, he has given praise to the activities of the Bolsheviki, and seemed rather delighted with their achievements in the field of public education. Strangely, not a word did he utter on the horrors perpetrated by OGPU in particular.

Time and again statements similar to his have been given out to the press by persons who, officially or otherwise, have been kept on the payroll of the Communist oppressors of Russia. The value of such public utterances is well known to every thinking man or woman. Nor is it possible to answer every one of these misstatements individually.

Tagore’s case is different: he is considered among the great living men of our age. His voice is heard and listened to all over the world.

By eulogizing the dubious pedagogical achievements of the Soviets, and by carefully omitting every reference to the indescribable torture to which the Soviets have been subjecting the Russian people for a period of over thirteen years, he has created a false impression that no outrages actually exist under the blessings of the Soviet Régime.

In view of the misunderstanding which may thus arise, we wish to ask whether he is aware of the fact that all Russia is groaning under the terrible yoke of a numerically negligible but well organized gang of Communists, who are forcibly, by means of Red Terror, imposing their misrule upon the Russian people?

Does he know that, according to statistical data disseminated by the Bolsheviki themselves, between 1923 and 1928, more than 3,000,000 persons, mostly workers and peasants, were held in prisons and concentration camps which are nothing but torture houses?

He cannot be ignorant of the fact that the Communist rulers of Russia, in order to squeeze the maximum quantity of food out of the peasants, and also with the intent of reducing them to a state of abject misery, are, and have been, penalizing dissenters by exiling them to the extreme north, where those who by a miracle are able to survive the severe climate are compelled by force to perform certain work which cannot be compared even with the abomination of the galley of olden times. These unfortunate sufferers are being daily and systematically subjected to indescribable privations, humiliations, suffering and torture.

At the very time of his visit in Russia, forty-six Russian professors and engineers were executed by OGPU without any pretense of trial, on the alleged ground that they dared to interfere with, or doubt the wisdom of, the notorious five-year plan.

At no time, and in no country, has there ever existed a government responsible for so many cruelties, wholesale murders and common law crimes in general as those perpetrated by the Bolsheviki.

Is it really possibly that, with all his love for humanity, wisdom and philosophy, he could not find words of sympathy and pity for the Russian nation?

By his evasive attitude toward the Communist grave-diggers of Russia, by the quasi-cordial stand which he has taken toward them, he has lent strong and unjust support to a group of professional murderers. By concealing from the world the truth about Russia he has inflicted, perhaps unwittingly, great harm upon the whole population of Russia, and possibly the world at large.

Iwan I. Ostromislensky
Sergei Rachmaninoff,
Count Ilya Tolstoy.

New York, Jan, 12, 1931

Тагор о России
«Кружок русской культуры» предъявляет
некоторые свои претензии редактору «Нью-Йорк Таймс»:

«Кружок русской культуры», целью которого является поощрение интеллектуального общения среди русских иммигрантов в Нью-Йорке, вынужден прокомментировать недавнее интервью, данное Рабиндранатом Тагором.

Он посетил Россию, и многие его высказывания об этой стране появились в различных периодических изданиях как в нашей стране, так и за ее пределами. К нашему большому удивлению, он высоко оценил деятельность большевиков и, похоже, был в восторге от их достижений в области народного образования. Странно, что он ни словом не обмолвился об ужасах, творимых, в частности, ОГПУ.

Подобные заявления неоднократно давали в прессе лица, которые официально или иным образом зависели от коммунистических угнетателей России. Цена таким публичным заявлениям хорошо известна каждому мыслящему человеку.

С Тагором дело обстоит иначе: он признан одним из великих людей современности. К его голосу прислушиваются во всем мире.

Восхваляя сомнительные педагогические достижения Советов и старательно избегая всякого упоминания о неопикуемых мучениях, которым Советы подвергают русский народ на протяжении более тринадцати лет, он создал ложное представление о том, что на самом деле при благословенном Советском режиме никаких безобразий нет.

В виду возникающего при этом недоразумения мы хотим спросить: знает ли он о том, что вся Россия стонет под страшным игом малочисленной, но хорошо организованной банды коммунистов, насильно, с помощью красного террора, навязывая свое беззаконие русскому народу?

Знает ли он, что, по данным статистики, распространяемым самими большевиками, с 1923 по 1928 год в тюрьмах и концлагерях, представляющих собой ничто иное как пыточные застенки, содержалось более 3 000 000 человек, в основном рабочих и крестьян?

Он не может не знать того факта, что коммунистические правители России, чтобы выжать из крестьян максимальное количество продовольствия, а также с намерением довести их до состояния крайней нищеты, преследовали и продолжают преследовать инакомыслящих, ссылая их на крайний север, где тех, кто чудом выжил в суровом климате, заставляют выполнять работу, несравнимую даже с мерзостью галерного труда давних времен. Эти несчастные страдальцы ежедневно и систематически подвергаются неопикуемым лишениям, унижениям, мучениям и пыткам.

В то самое время, когда он посещал Россию, сорок шесть русских профессоров и инженеров были казнены ОГПУ без всякого суда якобы за то, что они осмелились помешать пресловутому пятилетнему плану или усомнились в его мудрости.

Неужели, при всей своей человечности, мудрости и философии, он не мог найти слов сострадания и жалости к русскому народу?

Своей уклончивой и почти сочувственной позицией, которую он занял по отношению к коммунистическим могильщикам России, он оказал сильную

и несправедливую поддержку группе профессиональных убийц. Скрывая от мира правду о России, он причинил, быть может невольно, большой вред всему населению Росси, а возможно и миру в целом.

Иван И. Оstromысленский,
Сергей Рахманинов,
Граф Илья Толстой.

Нью-Йорк, 12 января 1931 г.

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