

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

(1873-1943)

STRING QUARTET No. 1 (10:36)

- 1 1. *Romance (Andante espressivo)* (5:37)
- 2 2. *Scherzo (Allegro)* (4:57)

The Budapest String Quartet

Joseph Roisman and Jac Gorodetzky, violins
Boris Kroyt, viola Mischa Schneider, violoncello

TRIO ÉLÉGIAQUE, for violin

violoncello and piano, Op. 9 (43:26)

- 3 1. *Moderato--Allegro vivace* (18:29)
- 4 2. *Quasi variazione* (17:13)
- 5 3. *Allegro risoluto* (7:39)

Joseph Roisman, violin Mischa Schneider, violoncello
Artur Balsam, piano

STRING QUARTET No. 2 (17:38)

- 6 1. *Allegro moderato* (7:12)
- 7 2. *Andante molto sostenuto* (10:23)

The Budapest String Quartet

Joseph Roisman and Jac Gorodetzky, violins
Boris Kroyt, viola Mischa Schneider, violoncello

Performed and Recorded on April 4, 1952

The Coolidge Auditorium of The Library of Congress

During his lifetime, Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) was venerated as a concert pianist, sought after as a conductor (twice the Boston Symphony offered him the post of Music Director, and twice he declined), but often merely tolerated as a composer (with the notable exceptions of his ubiquitous, and very early, *Prelude in C-sharp Minor* and his second and third piano concertos). Judged alongside his slightly younger compatriots, Stravinsky and Prokofiev (the even younger Shostakovich was then only establishing his credentials as one of music's "enfants terribles"), the Russian master of laconic, brooding countenance was dismissed by intellectuals as a hopeless reactionary whose creative work had no relevance to twentieth-century aesthetic. With another fifty-two years of perspective, Rachmaninoff's music--always kept alive by the masses--reveals ever greater ingenuity and stature to discerning tastes. Superbly conceived for piano and beautifully orchestrated, the quality of the creative mind at work is that of an inspired genius. Granted, some Rachmaninoff works, including a few of the larger compositions, suffer from a certain prolixity and momentary structural problems--then too, so did some of Chopin's, Schumann's, and Bruckner's.

All of Rachmaninoff's chamber music came from his youth, and all of his works in that genre (excepting those for two pianos) can be counted on ten fingers. Chronologically, they are:

1889 String Quartet (two movements)

- 1890 *Romance*, for cello and piano
 1890 *Romance*, for violin and piano
 1890 An untitled piece for cello and piano
 1892 *Trio élégiaque* in G minor, (single movement)
 1892 *Two Pieces* for cello and piano--the first a revision of an 1891 piano piece; the second an *Oriental Dance*, published as Op. 2
 1893 *Two Pieces* for violin and piano. 1. *Romance*
 2. *Hungarian Dance*, Op. 6
 1893 *Trio élégiaque*, in D minor, published as Op. 9, revised in 1907 and 1917
 1896 String Quartet (two movements)
 1901 Sonata for cello and piano, in G minor, Op. 19
 (There is yet another work, a string quintet believed to have been composed around 1890, but it has been lost.)

In the case of his two trios, the youthful Rachmaninoff was very obviously patterning himself on his idol, Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. Tchaikovsky, after declaring his antipathy for the combination of piano with strings, brought forth a masterpiece in that genre as a memorial to his dear friend, the pianist Nicholas Rubinstein. Rachmaninoff, it will be noted, called both of his trios "élégiaque" and for the second, he poignantly added..."In memory of P.I. Tchaikovsky." Like Tchaikovsky's *Trio*, both of Rachmaninoff's are lengthy works, ambitious in concept.

The D-minor work heard on this recording begins with a first movement that exceeds even the length of its predecessors (Tchaikovsky's model, and Rachmaninoff's own earlier attempt--which lasts for a duration of over a quarter-hour). Its many tempo modifications are too numerous to chronicle, although the basic indication is *Allegro moderato*. And, again like Tchaikovsky's work, the D-minor Trio's second movement is marked *Quasi variazione*, adding an additional twenty minutes to the time span. But whereas Tchaikovsky's third movement functions as a coda to his sequence of variations, Rachmaninoff's is a bonafide--almost autonomous--movement. Shorter than the others, it is nevertheless almost eight minutes long, and again involves numerous tempo changes (it begins *Allegro risoluto*).

The rarely-performed string quartets were brought forth in an edition by B. Dobrokhotov and G. Kirkor. The movements of the First Quartet are, respectively, 1) *Romance (Andante espressivo)* and 2) *Scherzo (Allegro)*; those of the Second Quartet, 1) *Allegro moderato* and 2) *Andante molto sostenuto*.

Although the Budapest Quartet's repertory was sometimes criticized for being overly conservative--they were best known for their matchless readings of the standard Viennese masterpieces; the ten mature Mozart string quartets and the same composer's quintets for two violas; the last three Schubert quartets, a judicious handful of Haydn's quartets, and almost yearly cycles of the Beethoven quartets predominate--a look

at their actual programs reveals a diversity and an adventurousness which might well surprise you. Venturing as far afield as Bartók, Stravinsky, Martinu, Milhaud, Krenek and Piston, the Budapest gave ample play to the Russian masters: they played Borodin's Quartet No. 2 in D, with its ever-popular *Nocturne*, both Prokofiev quartets, and the Op. 11 and 22 quartets of Tchaikovsky, along with his *Sextet*, Op. 70, "*Souvenir de Florence*." And they even included the two Rachmaninoff juvenilia at the memorable Library of Congress appearance documented herein.

The foursome at that time was comprised of Joseph Roisman, Jac Gorodetzky, Boris Kroyt, and Mischa Schneider. Gorodetzky, although sharing his older colleagues' Russian-Jewish ancestry, was a violinist largely schooled in the Franco-Belgian tradition (he had earlier done a stint as second violinist of the Guilet Quartet). His softening influence on the Budapest's forthright style worked to optimum advantage in these Rachmaninoff novelties, all of which are exquisitely light-fingered and refined jewellike realizations.

The pianist Artur Balsam (1906-1994), who joins two of the quartet's members in the D-minor *Trio élégiaque*, Op. 9, is probably best remembered as one of music's most admired collaborative pianists. Born in Warsaw, Poland, he studied in Lodz, making his debut there at age 12, and then went to Berlin, enrolling at the Hochschule für Musik and winning its Mendelssohn prize in 1930. Touring America for the first time with the youthful Yehudi Menuhin in 1932, Balsam took up

permanent residency in the United States a year later and over the years taught at Eastman School, Boston University and the Manhattan School of Music. An occasional soloist and an insatiable chamber musician, Balsam once quipped that "I played with everybody you can think of, with the exception of Heifetz--but that's a great exception!"

Balsam was a paragon--a marvel of relaxed professionalism; he was, as many of his colleagues and disciples attest, an instrumentalist of awesome facility and accomplishment and a sight-reader of almost unparalleled quickness. Hearing his masterly phrasing and luminous singing tone in this superlative performance (of a work that he had just learned!) is sufficient aural testimony to place Balsam in the highest artistic echelon. Mssrs. Roisman and Schneider, his two colleagues for the nonce, are obviously inspired by his musical presence.

--Harris Goldsmith

Harris Goldsmith is a pianist, author, critic and musicologist.



Joseph Roisman, Mischa Schneider and Artur Balsam rehearsing at The Library of Congress, 1949

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