

“Nobody Could See This Coming”: Marston Records’ Revelatory Rachmaninoff Release

“What the hell does *that* mean?” That was Ward Marston’s puzzled response to the discovery of a cryptic catalog entry in the University of Pennsylvania Ormandy collection. Pointing to a recording of Rachmaninoff’s *Symphonic Dances*, the entry went on to specify “Rachmaninoff in person playing the piano” and “Orchestra and conductor not identified.” Marston’s perplexity is understandable. One of the world’s premier recording restoration engineers, he knows as much about historical recordings as anyone; and he knew well that Rachmaninoff recordings have been something of a holy grail since the composer’s death. Rachmaninoff refused to allow live recordings—in fact, he refused to allow live broadcasts. Whenever there was a broadcast of an orchestral concert where he was the soloist in a concerto, he insisted on blanking out his part of the event, inserting his studio recording of the Second Concerto to fill in the space. A very few minor bits and pieces had shown up (more on that later), but every promise of a substantial discovery had been a dead end. “We pursued all the other avenues that might have led to a Rachmaninoff recording,” he told me in a recent conversation, “and none of them materialized. There was a rumor that a performance at the Lucerne Festival had been recorded, but that was debunked. And then there was another rumor that some guy, some wealthy man in Missouri I think, had claimed that he had rented recording equipment and he had actually made films of Rachmaninoff in Carnegie Hall. But it was all lies.”

So when Marston got a phone call about this catalog entry, he was justifiably baffled. Who was the first person to stumble on it? It’s a bit murky: The people involved in this story—and that includes such historical-recording gurus as Gregor Benko and Francis Crociata—all seem to be modest, and more interested in what was discovered than in who should get credit. “None of us can remember,” Marston says. “We all say, ‘Oh no, it was you that found it.’ And then the other person, ‘No, no, no. I think it was you.’” It might have been composer Jay Reise. Reise is on the composition faculty at Penn (see *Fanfare* 35:4 for an interview with Peter Burwasser)—but, as his opera *Rasputin* makes clear, he’s also fully absorbed in Russian music, and at the time he was working in the Penn Library, trying to track down Ormandy’s score of *Symphonic Dances* in search of Rachmaninoff’s late corrections and additions. On the other hand, the catalog entry might first have been noted by Simon Trezise, head of the music department at Trinity College, Dublin, who was doing research on the Philadelphia Orchestra. In any case, the upshot was that with the help of Reise and librarians at Penn, Marston soon had access to the recording that the catalog pointed to: two 10-inch, double-sided, 33-rpm aluminum discs.

So what in fact was it? The phrase “orchestra and conductor not identified” suggests an orchestral performance, but Marston knew that Rachmaninoff had never conducted the work. It also seemed unlikely that the entry referred to a performance where he simply sat in to play the orchestral piano part (much as Gershwin played the celesta on the first recording of *American in Paris*). Was it what Reise calls a “botched entry”? As Marston puts it, “I couldn’t imagine what it was. So, I put the needle down on the thing and well, *there it was*”: an impromptu recording in which Rachmaninoff demonstrates—apparently for Ormandy—how the *Symphonic Dances* should go, several weeks before the premiere.

“It’s impossible for me to describe my reaction,” says Marston. “I just sat there transfixed. I couldn’t believe my ears. Literally, I could not believe my ears. And the more I heard, the more I... The piano playing was so clearly Rachmaninoff. And all of that singing that goes along with it is exactly what you expect him to sound like. And he’s so involved. It’s just perfection. I was vibrating. I was ... I don’t know, I just can’t explain it.”

The effect on Reise was similar: “You can tell the second he starts playing that it’s him. There’s an incisiveness that he plays with that’s so clear.” Yet the spontaneity, too, is striking—“Those parts where he sings; it’s a joy to listen. You sense, ‘Oh, he likes this part as much as I do.’” Much the same reaction came from Francis Crociata. As Marston puts it, “He knows everything about Rachmaninoff. He was on some sort of a business trip or something and he had flown into Baltimore and I told him about it. And he immediately rented a car and drove up to my house, and I played it for him. And he made a comment that I guess I’ve since made myself: something like, ‘You know, we’ve been looking for something of Rachmaninoff that isn’t a studio recording. We’ve been looking for something for 40 years. In all of our searches, this is the one kind of a recording we would have never been looking for, would never have been expecting.’”

“You couldn’t dream this up. You couldn’t imagine something like this had ever been recorded unless there had been some letter from Ormandy or someone. And there’s nothing about it. I didn’t see this coming. Nobody could see this coming.”

How, in fact, did it come to be? The circumstances remain unclear, but, as Marston points out, given Rachmaninoff’s extreme resistance to live recordings, it is almost certainly to have been made behind the composer’s back, probably on the kind of recording equipment that, starting in the late 1930s, was being marketed for home use, using aluminum discs with a lacquer coating. Fortunately, these Rachmaninoff discs were, physically, in pristine condition. The recording seems to have been made some distance from the performance (as you’d expect, if it was made surreptitiously)—and while the piano comes through fairly clearly, the talking (and there’s a fair amount of discussion in and around the playing) is impossible to decipher. Given the probable secrecy of the recording, as well as the need to change discs (each held somewhere over nine minutes), it’s no surprise that there are gaps in the music (most serious, the ending of the third movement). Still, a good 27 minutes of the piece survives.

So, I ask Marston, how much work did he have to do to get the material into decent condition? “Let’s say, more than you might imagine, less than you might think. I worked on it for a few days, and so I think I got everything there is to get out of it. I think ... I hope.” The key was finding the right stylus—after that, it was a very low intervention process. “It’s mostly the stylus. That’s the big thing. I have, I don’t know, 25 or 30 different sizes of stylus. And these discs can be very particular. Since they’re home-cut discs, sometimes they don’t sound any good no matter what stylus you play them with. And then sometimes there’s just one stylus where all of a sudden the surface just drops away. And I think that I found a stylus that at least played the discs more quietly than the other styli that I used. Then I found out that there were various other little odds and ends and things that I could



to clean it up, which I did. I didn't put it through any kind of digital de-noising or anything like that. Rather, I made what I would call an archival transfer, which means that it's rough, but I didn't take anything away from the original." Normally, Marston would use some kind of digital techniques to reduce the noise. "But, with a recording like this I didn't want to, because de-noising can sometimes do weird things to the piano attack and to the decay of a note. And I thought, 'This is my only chance to preserve this recording. I'm going to be less interventionist than I might be with, let's say a Moiseiwitsch recording or something like that.' I was pretty careful not to go overboard."

The original recording was not made quite in score order, and there are a few breaks and repeats. Marston has thus served it up in two ways. First, we get an edited version of the performance in score order, with repeated passages eliminated and background conversation cut; then, as a sort of appendix, we're treated to the entire recording exactly as it was taken down.

As I suggested earlier, there *are* a few other non-commercial Rachmaninoff recordings in existence—all brief—and all five have been included in this collection as well. One is Rachmaninoff's setting of the traditional Russian song *Powder and Paint*, privately recorded for the composer. Two others are trifles that seem to have been recorded at a party, perhaps in around 1933 (the booklet suggests 1942, but Marston believes that's an error)—his *Polka Italienne* (with wife Natalie Rachmaninoff) and an impromptu accompaniment as his friends sing the folk song *Bublichki*. The last two, though, are a significant new discovery that would be headline news if they weren't overshadowed by the *Symphonic Dances*: the end of Brahms's Ballade, op. 10/2, and, far more striking, about 5 minutes from the beginning of Liszt's Second Ballade, both taken down in 1931 by Bell Telephone Labs in the Philadelphia Academy of Music, where the engineers were setting up to record another concert later in the day.

But to add to the value of Rachmaninoff's performances, Marston has also filled the set out with several recordings intended to put it in context. "We thought, 'Okay, the first thing that we should have is an as-early-as-possible orchestral performance of the *Symphonic Dances*.'" Ormandy might seem an easy choice, since the work was dedicated to him and the Philadelphia Orchestra, who premiered it. "But Ormandy clearly didn't like the work. He didn't perform it very much. And it turned out that Rachmaninoff didn't really like Ormandy's performance. I'm not sure whether Rachmaninoff reported on the premiere, which was in January of 1941. But I know that he heard Ormandy conduct it on tour in Ann Arbor. And he wrote to [niece] Sophia Satina that he 'played the *Dances* acceptably only in spots.'"

In contrast, there *is* "clear evidence" of the composer's admiration for Mitropoulos's performances. "He was absolutely crazy about Mitropoulos. We have a letter from Rachmaninoff to Mitropoulos saying that he had heard him conduct it and it was absolutely ideal. It was the perfect performance. And Rachmaninoff had worked with him on the piece as well. There's a letter somewhere of Rachmaninoff asking Mitropoulos—and this is just a loose paraphrase—"Is it okay with you, when you conduct at the Philharmonic next week, if I hire somebody to record it off the air. I want to have a record of this because you have a real way with this piece.'"

That performance, from 1942, is the one that Marston chose to include on the set—but his source is *not* the recording that Rachmaninoff himself had made. "I think the recording that Rachmaninoff had authorized or had paid to have made is at the Library of Congress," says Marston. "I've heard it, and it doesn't sound as good as our recording. Ours is a home-made, off-the-air recording, but it was made by a guy with decent equipment." Marston also had access to a slightly later Philharmonic performance of the *Symphonic Dances*, too, from 1950 or 1951, but "it's nothing like as good as this 1942 one. It's careful, it's slower, it's less spontaneous, it's more cautious. It's a good average performance, but nothing special. This 1942 performance has some ensemble issues and there are some wrong notes. But it's an absolutely splendid performance." Equally splendid is Mitropoulos's slightly earlier recording of the Third Symphony (also recorded with Rachmaninoff in the audience), which is included, too.

Whatever Rachmaninoff thought of Ormandy's performances of the *Symphonic Dances*, Ormandy's connection to the composer and the work is not insignificant, so he, too, is included on the set, also in a slightly unexpected way. "When I was going through the catalog of the Rhodes collection about four years ago," says Marston, "I spotted this Ormandy *Isle of the Dead*. And I said to myself, 'Hmm, I've never seen ... I don't think that recording is known to exist. I don't think anybody has this.' So, I asked the librarian there if she could pack those discs up and send them to me and she did. It's a memorial performance of *Isle of the Dead*"—made just a few days after Rachmaninoff died on March 28, 1943—"where Ormandy gives this little speech." Finally, to fill out the set, there's a live Moiseiwitsch performance of the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini from 1946—and a Stokowski recording of *Three Russian Folk Songs*, op. 41, the last of which is the same *Powder and Paint* that we hear on Rachmaninoff's disc.

A rich contextualization, then—but even without this additional material, this would be a major release. Is it the last new performance by Rachmaninoff that we'll ever hear? Marston thinks it is. "If something turns up, it would have to be something that we can't dream of." But of course, this performance of the *Symphonic Dances* is something no one dreamed of, either.

RACHMANINOFF *Symphonic Dances* (2 performances).^{1,2} **Symphony No. 3**.² **The Isle of the Dead**.³ **Three Russian Songs**.⁴ **Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini**.⁵ **Polka Italienne**.⁶ • 'Sergei Rachmaninoff, ⁶Natalia Rachmaninoff, ⁸Benno Moiseiwitsch (pn); ⁷Nadezhda Plevitskaya (mez); ²Dimitri Mitropoulos, ³Eugene Ormandy, ⁴Leopold Stokowski, ⁵Adrian Boult, cond; ⁶Schola Cantorum; ²New York P; ³Philadelphia O; ⁴American SO; ⁵BBC SO • MARSTON 53022-2 (3 CDs: 204:33) Live: 1931–1966

& BRAHMS Ballade, op. 10/2: **Excerpt. LISZT** **Ballade No. 2**: Excerpt. **TRADITIONAL** ^{1,7}**Powder and Paint** (arr. Rachmaninoff). ¹**Bublichki**

"You couldn't dream this up": so Ward Marston describes the discovery of two discs documenting Rachmaninoff's impromptu performance of substantial chunks (totaling about 27 minutes) of the *Symphonic Dances*. He's right; but if your reaction is anything like mine, you won't easily get it out of your dreams once you've heard it. Let's be frank: Serious music lovers (and this holds doubly true for critics) often tend to get jaded as we get older, in part because those mind-frying experiences of our early years (in my case, say, my first hearing of the Mahler Sixth or my first encounter with Josef Hofmann's Casimir Hall Recital) come less often the more we know. It had been some time since hearing something kept me up all night—but my first time through this performance ... well, to borrow from Marston again, it's impossible for me to describe my reaction.

What makes the performance so overwhelming? Rachmaninoff is one of those Golden Age pianists known almost exclusively through studio performances; and superlative as they are (and I would certainly rank Rachmaninoff as one of the three or four greatest pianists of the 20th century), it's been widely accepted by pianophiles that, like Godowsky's recordings, Rachmaninoff's don't capture the pianist at his best. Stravinsky

famously described Rachmaninoff as a “six-and-a-half foot scowl”—and in the recordings of even his most exciting or his most light-spirited repertoire (say, the Strauss-Tausig *You Only Live Once*), there’s almost always a sense of reserve. A perfectionist bent? A consequence of lack of feedback from an audience? (We know that the pianist was sufficiently sensitive to audience reactions—at least what he considered negative reactions—to introduce cuts while performing the *Corelli Variations* if he felt people were getting bored.) In any case, this recording (even with the gaps, the longest solo piece we have from him) gives us a glimpse—or more accurately, a blast—of what we’ve been missing. All the usual Rachmaninoff virtues are there (including such a clear sense of the through-line that you can feel where the music is going even when the recording cuts out). But they’re overlaid with such a sense of energy, joy, and—most surprisingly—Romantic sensibility that ... well, you couldn’t dream it up.

You can feel the energy and the sheer joy of playing from the very beginning of the first movement—especially when he *sings* the timpani part. As for the Romantic sensibility: If you sometimes think that Rachmaninoff plays his concertos a little too anti-Romantically, you may well be shocked by some of the give and take here. It’s most startling, perhaps, in the flexibility of his handling of the famous saxophone solo, but the rubato is illuminating (and engrossing) throughout. From beginning to end, this performance will change the way you think about Rachmaninoff as a pianist and about the *Symphonic Dances* as a piece. The range of color—Rachmaninoff’s ability to simulate the sound of an orchestra—is astonishing too. As an aside, I’ll mention that it is one of the very few examples we have, other than piano rolls (always suspect; see 8:6, 9:1, 9:3, and 11:6), where a major 20th-century composer can be heard playing one of his orchestral works on the piano. Shostakovich’s four-hand reading of the 10th Symphony, with Weinberg, is the only other example I can think of, although I’m sure there are readers out there who will be able to come up with others.

The other addition to the discography of Rachmaninoff the pianist here is the track that includes six measures (!) of Brahms (a composer otherwise unrepresented in his recordings) that pushes the *ritenuto* marking beyond what you might think possible, and the opening of Liszt’s Second Ballade, played with an astonishing range of mood and color. One quirk: Three measures are cut (77–79, shortly after the *Allegro deciso*). A memory slip? One composer’s editorial intervention in another composer’s work? It hardly matters: Through the really rumbly surface and the sounds of what seems a backstage conversation, you get a tantalizing glimpse of some astonishing pianism.

Dimitri Mitropoulos offers some astonishing conducting, too, in the two performances also included here. I don’t think I’ve ever heard such an extreme and wide-ranging orchestral reading of the *Symphonic Dances*—whether it be in the lushness of the more romantic sections or in the scorching ferocity before rehearsal 22 in the first movement, whether it be in the sharp bitterness of the opening of the second movement or in the disorienting tipiness around rehearsal 42 later in the movement, whether it be the feral shriek of the violins—like a bird of prey—three bars before rehearsal 63 or the delicacy of the rapid string figures soon after. Even in this non-professional recording (which actually has much more detail and timbral naturalness than you might expect), this 1942 reading is promoted to the top of my very long list. The Third Symphony, recorded just a year earlier, is similarly gripping: No other performance I know (certainly, not Rachmaninoff’s own) captures its often-maniac mood swings as shockingly as this one does. Writing of Mitropoulos’s commercial recording of *Isle of the Dead*, James Miller wrote that it was “the most intense, impassioned performance of [the work] that I have ever heard” (20:6). These live recordings are more incendiary still.

If Mitropoulos brings out the troubling side of Rachmaninoff’s art, Moiseiwitsch brings out the grace with as affectionate, light-fingered, and prismatic a reading of the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini as you’ll hear. Favorite moments? Listen to the delicacy of the *pp* at the end of the Sixth Variation or the seductive swing of the *Tempo di Minuetto* or the silken, hammerless playing of the 18th Variation. But such cherry-picking does the recording a disservice. This is one of the most hackneyed works in the repertoire—but in virtually every variation, Moiseiwitsch manages to seduce you out of your sense of familiarity. Several other Moiseiwitsch recordings of the Rhapsody have circulated; but this one (also issued on Testament; see the review by Huntley Dent, 39:3) may well be the most beguiling of them.

Stokowski makes a reasonably strong case for the rarely encountered *Three Russian Songs*—Ormandy, alas, does not do the same for *Isle of the Dead*. Yes, there’s some poignance in Ormandy’s opening speech; but even though the performance is a kind of requiem for the composer, who had died just five days before, it seems soft at its core, with a blending of colors and a slackness of rhythm that mashes the textures and cushions the impact. Richard Taruskin, in his superlative notes, says it has “the additional merit of documenting the cuts that Rachmaninoff entered into the Philadelphia Orchestra’s score”—but that seems an odd merit.

You may appreciate Ormandy’s contribution more than I do, though—and even if you don’t, that hardly influences the final verdict: This is, quite simply, the most important, and most arresting, historical release of the century, something that no lover of Rachmaninoff (as composer or pianist) or of piano music more generally can let slip by. It would be a top priority even if the sources were not so artfully restored, and it would be so even if it came in plain brown wrappers. Marston, however, has provided the kind of sound we’ve come to expect from this company, and the lavish program book includes three illuminating essays, one by Taruskin, one by pianist-composer-conductor Ira Levin, and one by the producers. At this point, to say this set will be on my Want List seems redundant. **Peter J. Rabinowitz**

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