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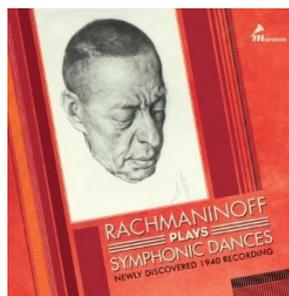
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**Sergei RACHMANINOFF (1873-1943)**  
***Rachmaninoff plays Symphonic Dances: Newly***  
***Discovered 1940 Recordings***  
Other recs. 1926-1966  
**MARSTON 53022-2** [3 CDs: 204:33]

A catalogue entry - "33 1/3; 12/21/40; Symphonic Dances...Rachmaninoff; Rachmaninoff in person playing the piano" copied from a typewritten record label on two ten-inch double-sided aluminium based, lacquer coated discs, a medium popular at the time for home recording, alerted Professor Jay Reise of the University of Pennsylvania that there was something here of notable historical importance. It had been sitting unnoticed in the University's Eugene Ormandy Music and Media Center, where the conductor's collection had been bequeathed after his death in 1986. Of slightly less importance, sitting in the archive, were private recordings of Rachmaninoff playing his *Polka Italienne* and the Russian folk song 'Bublichki'. All of this was brought to the attention of Ward Marston, and the rest is history.



Availability

**Marston Records**

This private inscription was probably made at the home of Eugene Ormandy, to prime the conductor prior to the premiere. It captures a moment in time, 21 December 1941 to be precise, when the composer gave an impromptu run-through of his latest composition the Symphonic Dances, Op. 45, an orchestral suite in three movements, composed the previous year. It was to be his final major work, a "last flicker" before he hung up his boots. Personally, he regarded it as his best composition and this is manifest in the infectious enthusiasm and joy conveyed. The American composer and arranger Robert Russell Bennett witnessed an earlier impromptu piano performance of the same work, and vividly describes the scene, in which the composer "...sang, whistled, stomped, rolled his chords....". Nicolas Medtner, discussing his friend's piano realizations of his orchestral scores, stated that "He played with such precision and astounding colouring it was better than any orchestra". As I listened to these acetates, I could only marvel at Rachmaninoff's ability to reduce the complex orchestral score to a piano realization. Unlike today's performers, he is freer and more flexible with tempi, and generous with rubato. The *Dies Irae* theme is strongly contrasted with the more life-affirming melodies. One has to make allowances for the acetate swish and the less than perfect sound quality of these home recordings.

There's much speculation that the event of 21 December 1941 was captured surreptitiously. There are several reasons for suggesting this. First of all, Rachmaninoff was averse to being privately recorded. This is borne out by the fact that the microphone is distantly positioned. Whilst the piano sound is startlingly vivid, the vocal contributions are rendered indistinct, so much so that they've resisted all attempts to transcribe them. Also, the sides of the discs are abruptly changed, resulting in a lack of continuity. Marston presents them, first of all in edited form, closely following the score (CD 1) and secondly as they were recorded (CD3).

Two weeks after this event, Ormandy premiered the work with the Philadelphia Orchestra, on January 3, 1941; both conductor and orchestra are its dedicatees. Sadly, that performance wasn't recorded, so we are treated to a professionally recorded aircheck from the New York Philharmonic under Dimitri Mitropoulos, dated 20 December 1942 in New York. This airing is of immense importance, as the composer gave advice to Mitropoulos prior to the concert, regarding tempo and interpretation and later gave the performance his imprimatur. In the presence of an audience, I like the performance very much, and the sound quality is more than acceptable. I admire Mitropoulos's compelling vision of the work. He extracts every last drop of excitement and intensity from the score, skilfully maintaining rhythmic incisiveness and highlighting the pungency and manifold hues of the sumptuous orchestration. The set also includes a live performance of the Third Symphony, again with Mitropoulos at the helm of the New York Philharmonic, dated 21 December 1941. He coaxes the very best from the orchestra. The first movement is unashamedly romantic, and he exquisitely contours the lush memorable theme. The slow movement is remarkable for its probing lyrical depth. In the finale, affable and upbeat, the orchestral colours are vibrantly potent.

Rachmaninoff was disappointed with a 1942 performance Ormandy gave of *The Isle of the Dead* and the Symphonic Dances in Ann Arbor. We can hear another interpretation of *The Isle* in an airing broadcast five days after the composer's death. The venue this time is Philadelphia. Ormandy pays tribute to

Rachmaninoff in a short oration which precedes it. Not very well picked up by the microphone, one strains to hear it. The performance contains the cuts sanctioned by the composer. Ormandy delivers an intensely powerful and impassioned reading, instilling just the right amount of morbidity into this dark and sombre score.

The composer greatly admired Benno Moiseiwitsch and referred to him as his "spiritual heir". The pianist was renowned for his interpretations of the older composer's music. It's fitting that Marston have included a 1946 radio recording of the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Op. 43 with the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Adrian Boult. It's a technically impressive performance, with Boult proving a sympathetic and engaging collaborator. I must admit that Three Russian songs for Chorus and Orchestra, Op. 41 are completely new to me. Leopold Stokowski directs the American Symphony Orchestra and Schola Cantorum in these performances from 1966. It's just a pity that the choir sounds recessed and consigned to the shadows for much of the duration.

Marston's documentation, a thirty-one page book in English, is second-to-none. Richard Taruskin's extended essay provides more than adequate background and context, whilst Ira Levin views things from a musician's perspective. There's also a detailed note from the producers. This set is of notable historical importance and it gets my warmest recommendation.

### **Stephen Greenbank**

#### **Contents**

##### **CD 1 [61:25]**

##### **Rachmaninoff Demonstrates His Symphonic Dances, Op. 45**

##### **Impromptu performance at the piano**

1. I. Non allegro (bar 1 to bar 41) [1:34]
2. I. Non allegro (bar 48 to bar 236) [8:02]
3. I. Non allegro (pickup to bar 241 to 263) [1:04]
4. II. Andante con moto, Tempo di valse (beginning to bar 176) [7:00]
5. II. Andante con moto, Tempo di valse (middle of bar 182 to end) [2:14]
6. III. Lento assai — Allegro vivace — Lento assai, Come prima — Allegro vivace (bar 8 to bar 214) [7:10]

An edited version of the original recording, with most of the repeated phrases and spoken comments removed, and with the music presented in its proper score sequence

*21 December 1940*

##### **Rachmaninoff: Symphonic Dances, Op. 45**

7. I. Non allegro [11:57]
  8. II. Andante con moto, Tempo di valse [9:45]
  9. III. Lento assai — Allegro vivace — Lento assai, Come prima — Allegro vivace [12:38]
- New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra conducted by Dimitri Mitropoulos.  
*20 December 1942, New York City*

##### **CD 2 [76:31]**

##### **Rachmaninoff: *The Isle of the Dead*, Op. 29**

1. Introductory radio announcement followed by Eugene Ormandy speaking about Rachmaninoff [2:54]

2. *The Isle of the Dead*, Op. 29 [18:42]

Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Eugene Ormandy

*2 April 1943, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

(This performance was given as a memorial to the composer five days after his death on 28 March)

##### **Rachmaninoff: *Symphony No. 3 in A Minor*, Op. 44**

3. I. Lento — Allegro moderato — Allegro [15:14]
4. II. Adagio ma non troppo — Allegro vivace [11:32]
5. III. Allegro — Allegro vivace — Allegro, Tempo primo — Allegretto — Allegro vivace [12:07]

New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra conducted by Dimitri Mitropoulos

*21 December 1941, New York City*

6. 'Belilitsi rumyanitsi, vy moi' (Powder and Paint) (Russian folk song, arranged by Rachmaninoff) [3:50]

Nadezhda Plevitskaya, mezzo soprano, with Sergei Rachmaninoff, piano

Victor Talking Machine Company private recording, made for the composer

*22 February 1926, New York City*

(Note: This song was used as the third of Rachmaninoff's "Three Russian Songs for Chorus and Orchestra, Op. 41." The Victor recording logs give the title as "Powder and Paint")

##### **Rachmaninoff: *Three Russian Songs for Chorus and Orchestra*, Op. 41**

7. I. Cherez rechku (Over the Stream), Moderato [3:30]
8. II. Akh ty, Vanka (Oh, My Little Johnny), Largo [4:40]
9. III. Belilitsi rumyanitsi, vy moi (You, My Fairness, My Rosy Cheeks or "Powder and Paint"), Allegro [4:04]

American Symphony Orchestra conducted by Leopold Stokowski, with the Schola Cantorum. *18 December 1966, New York City*

##### **CD 3 [66:37]**

##### **Rachmaninoff: *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Op. 43**

1. Introductory radio announcement [1:45]

2. *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Op. 43 [23:12]

Benno Moiseiwitsch, piano, with the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Adrian Boult

*14 September 1946, London*

3. Rachmaninoff: *Polka Italiene* [0:36]

with Sergei and Natalia Rachmaninoff, piano

*private recording, circa 1942*

4. Russian folk song: 'Bublichki' (Bagels) [1:26]

with Rachmaninoff accompanying friends at a party, circa 1942

5. Rachmaninoff plays ballades: Brahms Op. 10, No. 2, in D (middle of bar 145 to bar 150), and Liszt No. 2, in B Minor (through the end of bar 125; bars 77-79 omitted) [6:24]

recorded by Bell Telephone Laboratories during a Rachmaninoff recital at the Academy of Music. *5 December 1931, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

##### **Rachmaninoff Demonstrates His Symphonic Dances, Op. 45**

##### **Impromptu performance at the piano**

6. Side 1: Movement I. Non allegro (bar 48 to bar 236) [9:32]  
7. Side 2: [9:19]  
Excerpt 1: Movement I. Non allegro (pickup to bar 241 to bar 263)  
Excerpt 2: Movement III. Lento assai — Allegro vivace — Lento assai, Come prima — Allegro vivace (bar 8 to bar 214)  
8. Side 3: Movement II. Andante con moto, Tempo di valse (beginning to bar 176) 9:17  
9. Side 4: [5:05]  
Excerpt 1: Movement II. Andante con moto, Tempo di valse (middle of bar 182 to end)  
Excerpt 2: Movement I. Non allegro (beginning to bar 41)  
The unedited, complete recording, with each of the four acetate sides presented as track points. *21 December 1940*

The recording of Sergei Rachmaninoff playing his Symphonic Dances is reproduced from the original discs in the Eugene Ormandy Collection of Test Pressings and Private Recordings, 1930-1983, Ms. Coll. 440, with the permission of the University of Pennsylvania.

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