

**LEOPOLD STOKOWSKI**  
National Philharmonic Orchestra



Mastered in DSD256

**SERGEI RACHMANINOFF**  
Symphony No.3 in A Minor, Op. 44 / Vocalise

PLEASE SEE THE ORIGINAL DESMAR LINER NOTES FOR THIS RECORDING AUTHORED BY LEADING RACHMANINOFF AUTHORITY FRANCIS CROCIATA, REPRINTED ON HDTT BLOG PAGE WITH HIS KIND PERMISSION.

HDTT is presenting the legendary Leopold Stokowski's Desmar recordings in their first high definition release (including Pure DSD), based on HDTT's recent transfer of the original Desmar master tapes. In this recording of Rachmaninoff's Third Symphony, Stokowski is heard conducting the National Philharmonic Orchestra, a London orchestra created primarily to make recordings, by "cherry-picking" front-desk and other esteemed players from other great London orchestras, as well as top freelancers.

Both pieces in this recording are by Stokowski's friend and colleague, Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943), who was one of the greatest pianists of the 20th century, as well as one of that century's greatest composers. Stokowski (1882-1977) was five years younger than Rachmaninoff and lived a long, productive life, still making excellent recordings in his nineties (these were made at age 93, two years before Stokowski's death). As pointed out in Francis Crociata's notes, Stokowski was Rachmaninoff's favorite choice of conductor for his own compositions, and they recorded a number of them together.

Both recordings are historic audio documents in their own right. Stokowski premiered Rachmaninoff's Third Symphony with the Philadelphia Orchestra on November 6, 1936, only months after its completion, but he never recorded it or even performed it

again until the instant recording was made almost 40 years later. While the Vocalise exists in a number of versions, the 1912 original being a wordless song for soprano or tenor accompanied by piano, this Desmar recording is Stokowski's only recording of the full orchestration made by the composer in 1916. Needless to say, Stokowski's mastery of every aspect of the music heard here is unquestionable. How fortunate we are that Desmar's enterprising founder Marcos Klorman preserved Stokowski's authoritative interpretations, and in such brilliant sound, as experienced in this recording.

As noted by Recording Producer Antony Hodgson in the original Desmar album: "Working with Stokowski as recording producer for these sessions at the West Ham Pentacostal Mission [also referred to as the West Ham Central Mission], I was able to witness him creating, stage by stage, the glorious tonal richness with which we have long associated this conductor. In particular, the immense strength of the double-bass section underpinned orchestral sonority of great weight and range. The acoustics of this splendid hall with its very long reverberation period are very helpful to the recording engineer, and with Stokowski's approval, the orchestra was divided into instrumental choirs placed apart from one another so that both spaciousness and clarity could be obtained. This of course recalls [Stokowski's] methods of orchestral placement in his performances in America." Hodgson further reported that Stokowski was "always happy with this orchestra."

There are some similarities to be noted between the two remark-

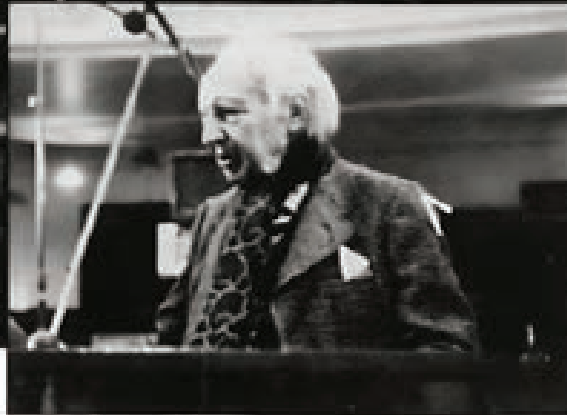
able figures represented by this extraordinary recording, the Russian-born Sergei Rachmaninoff and the British Leopold Stokowski (whose father was of partial Polish heritage, thus the name), both of whom were rather misunderstood during their lifetimes. Stokowski was revered by his fans, but in the latter half of the twentieth century, he came to be regarded by the “musical intelligentsia,” quite unfairly, as something of a musical charlatan, a willful, erratic conductor who cavorted with Mickey Mouse in the movies and was not to be taken too seriously. Rachmaninoff was similarly looked down upon as not being a “serious composer” by his contemporaries and later twentieth century critics, a throwback to the prior century who remained popular because of the pretty tunes we hear in his most popular works, some of which were eminently adaptable as pop songs. Both were also associated with a musical lushness that went out of style in the latter half of the twentieth century, when a much lighter-textured, more “urtext-driven,” angular style of music-making became more the norm, with the backward-looking ways of these two twentieth century giants being regarded as distinctly old-fashioned and out-of-date. None of these objections were in fact accurate.

Rachmaninoff’s career as a composer was seriously truncated by his need to support himself and his family, once he emigrated to the U.S., by focusing on his career as a virtuoso pianist, for which he was much in demand. Early in life, he was tutored in piano by Alexander Siloti, a pupil of both Tchaikovsky and Liszt, and in

composition by both Arensky and Taneyev, as well as being influenced and encouraged personally by Tchaikovsky. The bulk of his compositions by which we know him as a composer were written before he left Russia permanently in November, 1917, arriving in the U.S. in 1918. In fact, he completed only six works between 1918 and his death in 1943. His Fourth Piano Concerto, Op. 40, started in 1917, was completed in 1926; the other major works were Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43 (1934), Symphony No. 3 in A Minor, Op. 44 (1936) and Symphonic Dances, Op. 45 (1940).

In early 1942, Rachmaninoff, though keeping up a full performing schedule, was diagnosed as suffering from sclerosis, lumbago, neuralgia, high blood pressure and headaches. In February 1943, still touring to perform although suffering from exhaustion, he complained of coughing and back pain, and he was at last diagnosed with an aggressive form of melanoma. His last public performances at the keyboard were that February. His health continued to decline, and he passed away from the cancer on March 28, 1943, four days before his 70th birthday. Ironically, he had earlier announced his upcoming retirement from performing to concentrate on composition, but that was not to be.

As every pianist who has explored Rachmaninoff’s solo piano works can attest, he was anything but a composer of mere pretty tunes, and even before he emigrated to the U.S., his solo works demonstrated a level of harmonic and structural mastery, as well as originality, that were certainly “of their time,” even though he



*At recording sessions for Rachmaninoff 3rd Symphony  
(Photo: David G. Francis)*

never abandoned the appealing melodic sense that was one of his particular gifts. Although his history precluded a large later output to allow us to assess his development as a composer in great depth, it is undeniable, based upon the small series of later masterworks he produced, that during the last quarter-century of his life he continued to grow and develop as a composer, with his compositions definitely belonging to the twentieth century in their musical complexity and sophistication. Melody was always there, but bolstered by an adventurous harmonic sense that was unique to this composer.

In this context, the undervalued and still largely unfamiliar Third Symphony gives us an open window onto his later development as a composer. It is a complex work, but one that rewards us with stunning musical vistas, and an originality and depth of feeling that rightfully placed Rachmaninoff in the pantheon of important twentieth-century symphonists. Since its premiere by Stokowski in 1936, critics and listeners could not avoid comparing it unfavorably to his glowingly tuneful Second Symphony composed in 1907, almost three decades earlier. But Rachmaninoff continued to champion this Third Symphony throughout the rest of his life, and from today's vantage point, we can only agree that he was right to have done so.

Stokowski, despite an enormous number of recordings made over a long lifetime, is not adequately represented in that recorded legacy as a tireless champion of contemporary composers and new compositions. Rachmaninoff's Third Symphony was of

course one of those new works, back when it was premiered by Stokowski in 1936. Clearly, the lushness of Stokowski's orchestral palette was in accord with the composer's wishes, as borne out by their close professional relationship (see Francis Crociata's notes). Stokowski was granted a long, productive life, with a burst of outstanding recordings made in his nineties. He had reportedly lost some of his mental faculties at this point, but he sprang to life when placed on the podium to conduct, and there was no doubt that the old Stokowski magic was fully intact.

After recording for Vanguard and Decca in the 1960's and 1970's, Stokowski signed on to record for RCA, resulting in several notable recordings, including his first commercial Mahler recording, the Symphony No. 2. He retired from conducting concerts in 1974 (age 92), focusing thereafter on recordings, and his contract with RCA was completed in the spring of 1975. Enter Desmar, which made a scoop by persuading Stokowski to record the Rachmaninoff Third Symphony, which as stated, Stokowski had not even performed since its 1936 premiere (recorded April 28 and 30, and May 1, 1975), and the other Desmar recording, already released by HDTT in high resolution sound, also based on the Desmar master tape, "The Stokowski String Sound" (recorded August 16, 18 and 19, 1975). American Columbia reentered the picture and signed Stokowski up to a six-year contract, resulting in a number of sessions extending up through early June, 1977. These produced quite a number of shorter pieces, a stunning Sibelius First Symphony and Swan of Tuonela,



*The Recording of Rachmaninoff's Third Symphony at West Ham Central Mission, London.  
To the right Sidney Sax, concertmaster of the National Philharmonic Orchestra. (Photo: David G. Francis)*



Brahms Second Symphony, Bizet Symphony in C, and Mendelssohn Symphony No. 4 ("Italian"), all memorable recordings. After a summer break from recording, Stokowski passed away in his sleep only three months after his last recording session, on September 13, 1977, age 95. Sadly for us, he was scheduled to record Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony starting on September 19, a work he never commercially recorded, although a live performance has been released.

Despite an undeniable sense of showmanship, a carefully cultivated sense of charisma, and a certain amount of outright dishonesty about his background, when it came to conducting music, Stokowski was "the real thing," a serious, completely dedicated and outstandingly skilled professional. Meticulously prepared, polished results were consistently achieved from all manner of ensembles, without temper tantrums, loud displays, smashing of watches, etc. On the podium, he was all about the music. As for his purported willfulness with the letter of the score, his deviations can sound downright chaste when compared to the wayward conducting of many who have come after him.

There is something truly fitting, and moving, about the pairing of an aged but still formidable conductor, in the still-glowing twilight of his career, with one of the final works of a composer who was his friend and colleague decades before, who had entrusted him with the premiere of his final symphony. The result is a dynamic performance of a magnificent work, full of fire, grace and palpable beauty, extremely well-captured by the microphones, that strips away the years.

by John H. Haley

Photos: © 2023 Monument Preservation Canton Lucerne/Priska Ketterer.

Views of the recently restored Villa Senar, Rachmaninoff's summer retreat that he built on a five acre site on the shores of Lake Lucerne in 1930. The name derives from the first two letters of Rachmaninoff's and his wife Natalia's



first names, with the final "r" as the initial for their last name. Rachmaninoff spent summers there until 1939 and composed both his Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini and his Symphony No. 3 there. See <https://villa-senar.lu.ch/t>

1 Lento; Allegro moderato (16:58)

2. Adagio ma non troppo (9:41)

3. Allegro (12:03)

4. Vocalise, Op. 34, No. 44 (6:55)

(arranged by the composer for full orchestra)

Recorded by Desmar in West Ham Pentecostal Mission, London,  
on April 28 and 30 and May 1, 1975

Engineer – Bob Auger

Executive Producer – Marcos Klorman

Producer – Antony Hodgson

*This recording was transferred from  
the original Desmar Master Tapes 2023.*

*This release was mastered in DSD with no PCM.*



For more info e-mail us:  
[info@highdeftapetransfers.ca](mailto:info@highdeftapetransfers.ca)  
or visit our website:  
[www.highdeftapetransfers.ca](http://www.highdeftapetransfers.ca)