Sergei Rachmaninoff

“The Isle of the Dead,” Symphonic poem, Opus 29

SERGEI VASILIEVICH RACHMANINOFF was born in Semyonovo, district of Starorusky, Russia, on April 1, 1873, and died in Beverly Hills, California, on March 28, 1943. He composed “The Isle of the Dead” (“Ostrov myortvykh”)—inspired by a painting of the same name by Arnold Böcklin—between January and March of 1909 while living in Dresden. The first performance took place in Moscow on April 18, 1909, with Rachmaninoff conducting.

THE SCORE OF “THE ISLE OF THE DEAD” calls for three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, six horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, harp, and strings.

Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901) could barely keep up with the demand for his celebrated spooky painting “The Isle of the Dead” (“Die Toteninsel”). Eventually he painted five different versions for various commissions between 1880 and 1886; one hangs in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The basic scene is always the same (see page 39). Viewed from the stern, a small boat rowed by a long-haired oarsman is transporting a standing figure clothed in white (perhaps a widow?) accompanying a draped coffin to burial on an islet covered with towering cypresses and imposing cave-like crypts. The sunless sky stretches low and purplish, but eerie bright light glares off the white robes and stone walls.

Böcklin never provided an explanation of the painting’s “meaning,” but called it a “dream picture. It must produce such a stillness that one would be awed by a knock on the door.” (In fact it was the art dealer Fritz Gurlitt, not Böcklin, who gave the picture its title.) According to some sources, the cemetery was modeled on the English Cemetery near the house in which Böcklin lived for a time in Florence, and where one of his children was buried. In many of his paintings, Böcklin employs elements of Greek mythology, so critics have speculated that the oarsman in “The Isle of the Dead” is intended to represent Charon, who, according to Greek myth, pilots the boat that transports the dead across the River Styx to their final resting place.

Numerous artists, composers, writers, celebrities, and even dictators have been inspired by Böcklin’s rendering of the gloomy, atmospheric subject. (Hitler, a failed painter, bought one of the versions in 1933.) Sigmund Freud and Lenin both had prints of “The Isle of the Dead” hanging in their rooms. Just why this symbolist painting became so popular is a mystery, but it does treat a universal subject that we all have to face sooner or later: death and the loss of a loved one. And Böcklin’s enigmatic depiction of the scene leaves plenty of room for imaginative personal interpretation and speculation.

Just which version of the painting inspired Russian composer Sergei Rachmaninoff to compose a symphonic poem is also something of a mystery. He may have seen a black and white reproduction in Paris in May 1907. Or perhaps he saw the version hanging in a Leipzig museum with his new Dresden friend Nikolai Struve, to whom he eventually dedicated his composition. Or perhaps he saw the painting in Berlin. Or perhaps all three. In any case, he was pleased to have found this source of inspiration, since he had been searching for a new subject for a large symphonic poem for several years. “When composing, I find it of great help to have in mind a book just recently read, or a beautiful picture, or a poem,” Rachmaninoff said in an interview. “Sometimes a definite story is kept in mind, which I try to convert into tones without disclosing the source of my inspiration.”

By 1909, when he composed his symphonic poem, Rachmaninoff had completed two of his three symphonies and two of his four piano concertos, as well as several operas and numerous piano pieces. Since autumn of 1906, the composer had been living with his wife and daughter away from Russia, in Dresden. It appears he made this move in part to escape the turbulence of Russian cultural and political life in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1905, which led to widespread strikes, demonstrations, and disruptions in concert life. He was also tired of being distracted by the constant professional demands made on him in Moscow. In the cultured, elegant capital city of Saxony, with its magnificent museums and opera house and parks stretching along the Elbe, Rachmaninoff sought to find a quiet environment in which to devote himself completely to composition. Another factor that drew him to Dresden, where a sizable Russian expatriate community lived, was the proximity of the city of Leipzig. There, his conductor idol Arthur Nikisch (who had been conductor of the BSO from 1889 to 1893) led the renowned Gewandhaus Orchestra.

Settled with his family in a “charming” *Garten-Villa* on Sidionienstrasse, Rachmaninoff found Dresden congenial even if “the people are quite antipathetic and rude, with nothing but crooks all around.” In the summers he would travel back to Russia to stay at the estate of his wife’s family in Ivanovka. In Dresden Rachmaninoff also made friends with a fellow Russian, Nikolai Struve, a composer and member of the editorial board of the Editions Russes de Musique, the publishing firm created by Serge Koussevitzky some years before he became the conductor of the Boston Symphony. Rachmaninoff’s frequent contact with Struve in Dresden from 1906 to 1909 helped him stay connected to Russian language, culture, and music. The two men remained friends until Struve’s tragic early death in an elevator accident in Paris in 1920, a strange twist of events considering his close connection to the composition of *The Isle of the Dead.*

In his masterful and dramatic musical setting of Böcklin’s painting, Rachmaninoff stresses the vision of the boat being rowed across the water toward the island cemetery. He accomplishes this by employing an unusual 5/8 meter at the outset and throughout, with eighth-notes in alternating pairs of two and three, creating the repetitive, dreary motion of the oars. Against this gently surging background (in A minor) Rachmaninoff then introduces, first in fragments and then in full, the eight-note theme of the *Dies irae* from the Latin requiem mass, creating a dark, funereal atmosphere. These two musical ideas (and a descending phrase of lamentation) gradually build to an enormous climax conveying grief and desolation, presumably coinciding with the boat’s arrival at the island’s shore. Then Rachmaninoff departs from Böcklin’s painting into the realm of his own imagination. The meter changes to 3/4 and the key signature to E-flat major, and an entirely new theme is introduced in the strings, full of yearning, life, and love. Like the other great romantic melodies from Rachmaninoff’s symphonies and concertos, it swoops and surges and beckons, taking pleasure for one last time in the beauties of earthly existence on the threshold of eternal darkness. Before long, however, the rowing motif, the *Dies irae* theme, and the key of A minor inevitably return to claim the dead soul. The “theme of life” returns one last time toward the very end, only to vanish into the murk. Rachmaninoff’s construction of *The Isle of the Dead* is compelling in its simplicity and emotional power, one of the most perfect examples of program music ever composed.

In a letter to Leopold Stokowski written in April 1925, Rachmaninoff commented on a performance of the work by the Philadelphia Orchestra with Stokowski that he had heard the preceding month in Philadelphia. “In your interpretation,” Rachmaninoff wrote, “there were several details regarding tempo and intonation that surprised me. But after listening to several measures, the force of your talent made me overcome my reservations. There is only one place where I cannot agree with your interpretation, and that is in the E-flat major section. It should represent an enormous contrast to everything else: it should be performed faster, more nervously and emotionally. This part is not connected with the image of the ‘painting,’ actually it’s a kind of appendix to it and therefore the contrast is absolutely essential. At first—death, then—life.”

Harlow Robinson