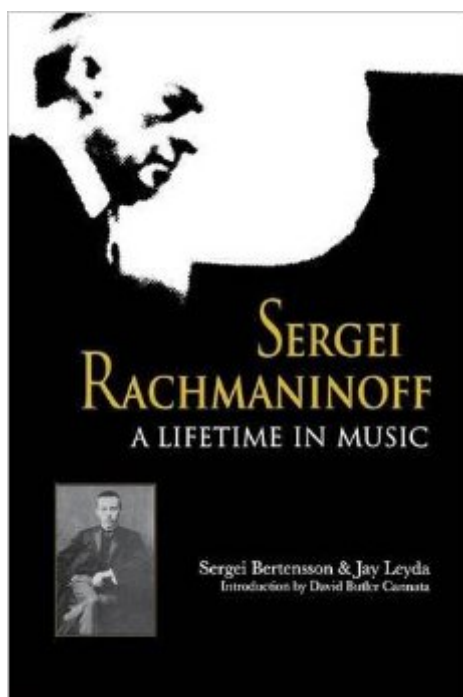


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Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime In Music (Russian Music Studies)



Synopsis

Sergei Rachmaninoff A Lifetime in Music Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, with the assistance of Sophia Satina With a new introduction by David Butler Cannata An indispensable and captivating document, now back in print! Throughout his career as composer, conductor, and pianist, Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943) was an intensely private individual. When Bertensson and Leyda's 1956 biography appeared, it lifted the veil of secrecy from several areas of Rachmaninoff's life, especially concerning the genesis of his compositions and how their critical reception affected him. The authors consulted a number of people who knew Rachmaninoff, who worked with him, and who corresponded with him. Even with the availability of such sources and full access to the Rachmaninoff Archive at the Library of Congress, Bertensson, Leyda, and were tireless in their pursuit of privately held documents, particularly correspondence. The wonderfully engaging product of their labors masterfully incorporates primary materials into the narrative. Almost half a century after it first appeared, this volume remains essential reading. Sergei Bertensson, who knew Rachmaninoff, published other works on music and film, often with a documentary emphasis. Jay Leyda wrote extensively on Russian music and film, as well as on American literature. David Butler Cannata is Professor of Music at Boyer College of Music, Temple University. Sophia Satina was Rachmaninoff's sister-in-law and cousin. Russian Music Studies • Malcolm Hamrick Brown, founding editor

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Customer Reviews

This 1956 book is a 2001 reissue and might qualify as the seminal book to appreciate the life of Sergei Rachmaninoff. It comprises some commentary by Bertensson and Leyda (they act as interlocutors of a sort), but, more importantly, it is a series of lengthy excerpts from letters by Rachmaninoff, family, friends, music critics and newspapers; carefully arranged with commentary by time and place to give an in depth and candid overview of the life of this composer, pianist and conductor. While the authors' gentle and admiring sensitivity to the composer enhance the story, their touch is neither intrusive nor annoying. Criticism comes from various music critics identified by name, date of the performance and publication. The appendix is a complete and valued listing of Rachmaninoff's work and records at the time of publishing. A learned introduction is provided by a professor from Temple University. The role of music critic during his time had more influence than it does in today's world. In 1919, after a performance, a typically snotty Boston critic challenged Rachmaninoff whether real genius was compatible with popularity. The shy, affable Rachmaninoff responded "Yes, I believe it is possible to be very serious, to have something to say, and at the same time to be popular. I believe that. Others do not. They think - what you think." A century after his riposte, there is hardly - and hardly has been - a season for any symphony which does not include the Rhapsody, the Concertos and the Symphonies. His Second and Third Concertos have been fertile soil for movie themes since the 1920s; in "Brief Encounter," his Second Concerto is as much a star as Trevor Howard. The First Movement of the Third Concerto was snapped up by Philip Glass in his theme music for "the Hours.

This book is supposed to be a biography of Rachmaninoff written by Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda. In fact, it is neither. This book is actually a collection of excerpts from letters, mostly but not only Rachmaninoff's own, occasionally interspersed with authorial comments which chiefly show that the authors are very indifferent writers indeed. Many of the letters are haphazardly selected and quoted too extensively, including many insignificant details that should have been omitted. The letters are meticulously documented, but it is seldom that their content is examined critically by the authors. For example, in one early letter Rachmaninoff mentions, with great determination, that he was going to get married but we never learn anything more about that; the numerous mental states he refers to are almost always left hanging in the air. Musical or biographical analyses of Rachmaninoff's works are even rarer and, when present, painfully pedestrian; the same goes for his activities as a pianist and a composer. The ill-fated First Symphony, for instance, is subject to only a few lines of psychological nonsense about its supposedly programmatic character. Although the

book is organized in a chronological way, the continuity of the narrative (if that is the word) is often disrupted, and even the current year printed in the upper part of every page doesn't help the matter. Rachmaninoff's friends, family and ancestors are all shadowy figures that never come to life. In short, it is beyond me how other readers could find the book absorbing. For my part, it was a chore of colossal dullness. On the positive side, the book is a good starting point for those seriously interested in Rachmaninoff's life and personality.

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