



RACH-THREE ROCKS MEADOWBROOK:

A Retrospective Review

By Chris Brockman

If aesthetic experiences ever come up in a conversation (and they do occasionally), I am ready to recount my greatest one of all. It happened at the Meadowbrook Music Festival, August 30, 1969, and it was hearing and seeing Andre Watts play Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 3* with the Detroit Symphony, conducted by Seiji Ozawa. There are clear reasons why this performance remains embedded in my consciousness after forty years. I'd like to present these in sharing one of the best things that happened to me as a student at Oakland University

Back in those days and at least until I graduated in 1971, O.U. students could attend Meadowbrook concerts for free, if they sat on the hill. This was a wonderful advantage for me and, I'm sure, for other students. For one thing, I had married in the middle of the '67-68 school year, and by the time of the 1969 concert my wife and I had a baby to take care of. We lived in the Coral Ridge Apartments in Rochester, and to make our \$135 a month rent, my wife worked at the Brass Lamp in Rochester. I delivered pizzas for Little Caesar in Pontiac and worked for my father, a paint contractor, in the summer. (At various times, I did painting at Sunset Manor, Meadowbrook Hall, the Meadowbrook greenhouse, the old stables, and even

the children's playhouse. I also helped paint the dressing rooms under the stage at the Baldwin Pavilion!)

The gist of all this is that my wife (also an O.U. student) and I would never have been able to attend Meadowbrook concerts if we had had to pay for them. As it was, we could go to symphony concerts once or twice a week during the summer, and it was most certainly an important part of our college education. It also came at a fortuitous time. I had taken Professor Collins' legendary music appreciation class, and though it didn't increase my appreciation of music *per se* (I very much appreciated rock and roll and folk music), it most definitely helped me to an abiding love for classical music. Since I also was a philosophy major and was especially interested in aesthetics, classical music provided material for judging what was good and what was great art.

And so the stage was both figuratively and literally set for Watts, Ozawa, the DSO, and what was probably the greatest performance ever of one of the greatest piano concertos ever. We no doubt left baby Kira with my wonderfully willing parents, and set off for Meadowbrook with a blanket and picnic dinner. We also came with certain expectations, having already developed a strong affinity for "romantic" music. The program was Glinka's overture to *Ruslan & Ludmilla*, Debussy's *La Mer*, Ginestera's suite from *Estanza*, and, of course, the Rachmaninoff No.3. This was a *magical* program!

The magic continued with Seiji Ozawa, the young and fiery music director of the Toronto Symphony and soon-to-be music director of the Boston Symphony. His reputation for bringing out the full-blown romanticism in the music he conducted made him seem the perfect partner for Watts, who had the same reputation. Ozawa opened with the Glinka, spirited, with his Beatle-like mop of black hair bouncing along as he interpreted the music with his entire body, his baton slashing the air like a stylized Zorro.

This gave way to perhaps the perfect music for lying on a blanket on the Meadowbrook hill, *La Mer*. Shimmering and sensuous, Debussy's model of impressionism is at least as pal-

pable as one of expressionism. The setting at Meadowbrook is a catalyst for both, whether achieved with one's eyes closed soaking in the surround sound, gazing up at the stars, or watching the massed source of the waves of music bright and intricately animated on the stage. Ozawa brought everything out of the music, and maybe even more, that the composer breathed into it. A massive sigh and tumultuous applause brought on intermission.

Hmmm, I observed, there were a few unused seats down on the pavilion, in the first two rows in the middle. What a shame they should go wasted. We made sure that didn't happen; they were ours for the second half. We ended up with the piano right in front of us, a fact that the subsequent performance makes hard to forget.

Anyone who has seen Andre Watts in concert knows that he plays with his entire body, and especially his face. He grimaced during the concerto as if he were under the influence of some terribly strong drug, and indeed he was—the music. It took a bit to get used to this, but it soon became apparent from the glorious passion that he drew from the piano that Watts had no part of his being left for any sort of melodramatic affectation. Wearing his passion on his face and in his body language was not only completely unaffected, it was a visual aid to one's own total surrender to the music.

Not that any visual component was *necessary*, the music was about as complete an aural aesthetic experience as one could hope for. The panoply of visual fascination did add a dimension, however. The lights, the orchestra, Ozawa, and Watts himself, his hands and arms as expressive and lovely as any ballet dancer, made it mesmerizing.

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Rachmaninoff is one of the most popular and least critically acclaimed of the great composers. Throughout the Twentieth Century, he was most often treated critically as a *mere* Romantic (critics generally treating Romanticism as aesthetically, if not musically, inferior to other schools of music), and a de-

rivative one at that. Both these attitudes probably stem from the immense popularity of Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 2* and his *Prelude in C sharp minor*. The prelude was *de rigueur* for one of Rachmaninoff's own concert, and he was one of the most popular and successful of touring soloists in the Twentieth Century. The Second Piano Concerto was also often on a Rachmaninoff program and still is one of the most recorded and played of concertos. One of its themes even achieved the status of a popular song, "Full Moon and Empty Arms," recorded by Sinatra, among others. Music from both these, as well as other of his works, appeared in the scores of scores of movies, beginning with 1932's *Doctor X* and most recently with the 2007 *Spiderman Three*. The *Piano Concerto No. 3* was featured prominently in *Shine* in 1996, and the famous 18th variation from *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* was the love theme in 1980's *Somewhere In Time*.

Because both the *Piano Concerto No. 2* and the *Prelude in C sharp minor*, in isolation, could be considered fairly typical of the Romantic genre, Rachmaninoff got the same reputation. It didn't help that they were played over and over. What gets ignored is that many of Rachmaninoff's works are more than typical; they are epitomic. The exquisite *Symphony No. 2*, the two wonderful suites for two pianos and the hauntingly beautiful *Vocalise* are good examples of this, as are many of the composer's extensive works for solo piano. Instead of comparing these works to any other music, other Romantic compositions should properly be compared to Rachmaninoff's. In addition to this culminative quality, other works such as *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* and the *Symphony No. 3* are really quite unlike anything else.

Much of Rachmaninoff's work, including the *Piano Concerto No. 3*, has a quality of actual frugality, which is not something that usually comes to mind with Rachmaninoff—especially not to critics' minds. His music is so rich with melody and so deep with development that any thought of economizing is unthinkable. With Rachmaninoff, however, everything that's

there *needs* to be there. And everything that's there exhibits the voice, conviction, and genuine feeling of the composer.

The *Piano Concerto No. 3* starts without fanfare or introduction, with a strong melody that Rachmaninoff immediately begins to develop as if to say: "There will be no messing around here. Nothing wasted. Nothing that isn't to the point." The first movement sparkles along. The piano almost never stops pouring out galaxies of points that fill the musical sky and leave the listener in absolute awe of the beauty and scope of the aesthetic universe. No wonder this is considered the hardest of concertos to play! (And, paradoxically, the easiest to listen to.) Between shuttling to the moon, the planets, the stars, Rachmaninoff brings us back to the original theme; shall we say reminding us that all this wonder is derived from the here and now.

If we needed any reminding, the second movement brings us back to earth and back deep into ourselves with one Rachmaninoff's signature lush and lovely slow themes. Though he presents the theme simply with the piano near the beginning, it's the long, slow crescendos, so achingly beautiful, that bring the listener back so powerfully to the realization (but certainly not at this point the verbalization) that it's all about us, that the music only resonates against our souls.

The final movement is, all alone, one of the absolute wonders of music. It is the entire concerto in microcosm. The first two movements prepare us for the third; the third pulls us with incredible magnetism to the conclusion. The entire movement strives for the ending with a greater inevitability than that of any other piece of music. Time and again Rachmaninoff builds a musical mountain from which the listener can see the promised land; time and again there is another mountain to climb. Despite the fact that each height is fascinating in itself, the tension builds to such a point the listener can't wait for the music to end—and hopes it never will.

Rachmaninoff put all of this into the music. It remains for the performer to discover it, embrace it, and use his or her technical prowess to bring it to light and life. With such an op-

portunity and such a challenge, for the true Romantic there can be no holding back. The question with such an incredibly difficult composition, however, is the following: “Does the performer have what it takes?” With Andre Watts, the answer is enthusiastically affirmative. The *picture* of his giving the music his all had its counterpart in the sound of music so affecting that one could not conceive of it being any more perfect.

If Andre Watts channeled the soul and perhaps the fingers of Rachmaninoff in the first two movements, in the third movement he *became* the music. Watching him had, to this point, given visual emphases to the music. By the time the third movement was on its way, there was no distinction between the two. Was it the talent and insight of Andre Watts that made the music so great on this night, or was it the music that called Watts to greatness? The only good answer is: “Yes!”

With the performing arts, a third party is involved in the magic of greatness. In this case it was I who became great, because I too became the music. For this I have undying gratitude for Sergei Rachmaninoff and Andre Watts.