

IN
SEARCH
OF
RACHMANINOFF

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excerpt from this poem, in a different version, first appeared.

*Lovelessness, indifference, will never be able to generate
sufficient power to slow down and linger intently
over an object, to hold and sculpt
every detail and particular
in it, however minute.
Only love is capable of being aesthetically productive. . . .*

—Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *K filosofii postupka*, 1924
(Toward a philosophy of the act)
tr. Vadim Liapunov

*Even with the disaster of living through what has befallen Russia,
where I spent my happiest years, I always feel that my own music
and my reactions to all music remained spiritually the same,
unendingly obedient in trying to create beauty. . . .*

Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninoff, 1939

Не говорите мне: он умер, он живет,
Пусть жертвенник разбит--огонь еще пылает.
Пусть роза сорвана--она еще цветет.
Пусть арфа сломана--аккорд еще рыдает.

Semyon Nadson, 1886



SONG THREE: VIVO

Рассказать ли немного о себе?
Shall I tell you tales of adventure,
like a blond Scheherazade,
to bring you back
every night?
My tales are different.

Child of Stalin's Russia
and Hitler's Germany,
I grew up in the brokenness
of emigration.
In the DP camps near Hamburg
Russians, Ukrainians, Poles
circled each other
with hollow eyes,
hoping for that visa
away from forced repatriation.

We knew hunger—
milk and butter were scarce.
My bones grew soft
from rickets.
Do I suffer now?
My bones are straight and strong.
My hands play Rachmaninoff.

I have learned the secret
of a mysterious island
three kingdoms away.

On that island
whose forests shimmer
green and gold
by a tall oak tree
deep in the ground
in an engraved silver box
wrapped in azure velvet
is the perfect muse
I would present to you.

Her fingers can cure
your headaches,
your private torture.
You can unwrap
the azure cloth
in times of desperation—
you recall that London concert
where a migraine stayed with you
on stage
for two hours?
The audience never knew.

Your Calliope would give you
a cranberry-red potion;
she would grant you entry
to the musical phrases you seek.
On the steppes of Ivanovka
or the streets of Moscow
she would nourish you.
And I would hide behind her eyes.

In New York loneliness drew
a girl with Russian braids
to the piano.
My teacher Mr. Caruso
would sit with me
at that black, hulking form
with its endless keyboard,
and we would forge
harmonious sound
out of an immigrant's confusion.
The piano understood Russian,
or German, or English—
it needed no translator.

I studied with a concert pianist
while my parents were severing
their connections
with each other
and Russia.

My torturers slashed my back
repeatedly
with a serpentine whip,
and cut out my tongue.
They put my body on a rack,
pulling my limbs
to the four stone walls.

My best friends
were the sparrows and pigeons
I brought home,
whose wings I mended.
They transported me
on well-plumed backs
to their avian kingdom
of glittering firebirds.
They lowered me into a nest
of iridescent violet feathers
where I could rest.

True to Tolstoy's nightmares,
you enticed me
into your melodies
and rhythms.
Pianistic architect,
you taught me
your language:
images of a birch forest,
saintly figures on an icon,
persons remembered
and loved,

or paintings of death
revealed themselves
in musical form.
You said the minor tones suited you;
the bright tones were more difficult.

I carried you
in a procession of the cross
through six years of illness—
arthritis claimed my hands.
The doctors and nurses
at the hospitals where I healed
called me the Rachmaninoff patient.

Pneumonia sufferers gasping,
car accident victims blanketed
in snow-white bandages,
operation survivors pushing IV poles
in the hallways—
in a world sanitized
for living and dying
you reminded me
of beauty.
Your third concerto
was my companion.

SONG FOUR: LENTO

You fall into depression,
certain that your creative springs
have run dry.
Your first symphony haunts you:
the Petersburg Orchestra
lost its meaning
and you bolted into the night,
chased by discordant sounds.
They chased you into your darkest self.

You confront the malady
that has imprisoned minds
of writers, painters, musicians
since the times
of Homer and Sappho.
You must summon your muse
from her silver box,
for she makes the springs flow.

Shy around strangers,
you protect yourself
from the winds of Moscow.
The Royal Doors of an Orthodox church
shield the altar from unbelievers.



Photo by Daxler Buck for Rhodes College

Valeria Z. Nollan is a specialist in Russian literature and critical theory whose books on Vladimir Soloukhin and Mikhail Bakhtin have been published by Northwestern University Press. She is also a published poet and a trained amateur pianist who has given recitals of Rachmaninoff's music in the U.S., England, and Russia. She is Chair of the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee. She says of her new book: "*In Search of Rachmaninoff* records in poetic form my lifelong connection with Sergei Rachmaninoff's identity. I wrote it in St. Petersburg, Russia, but it had been writing itself for many years. The poem treats themes of Russian emigration, the creative process, and illness and recovery—but most of all it is concerned with the beauty of Rachmaninoff's music and the triumph of his life."

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