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Artists recreating our world with Rachmaninoff as a guide and partner

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Abstract

This paper proposes that artists be at the forefront of community recovery in our post-COVID-19 world. To achieve this proposition, it delves into the early professional life of the renowned Russian composer and pianist Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873 – 1943), notably focusing on his sense of failure after the premiere of his first symphony and his subsequent recovery. It examines the importance of mentors who support professionals through early career mistakes, the significance of learning the limits of risk-taking, and the value of failure as guidance for development. Rachmaninoff's contribution to humanity is profound, as evidenced by the enduring performance of his music in concert halls around the globe, making him an appropriate guide and partner in fulfilling the recovery agenda.

Keywords: Career development; Diplomacy; Failure; Leadership; Music; Political skill

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1. Introduction

> "[In the third piano concerto] it gets harder, even in the slow movement. In the slow movement, you've got time to breathe, for like 30 s, and then it's even harder than the first movement, and it doesn't stop. I would see the things he would ask you to do with the octaves and the speed and the accuracy. People who can do things like that – it should be illegal! It's inhuman!"
>
> James Rhodes, pianist (33:49)[1]

> "There is a moment in the first movement, in the solo bit, the cadenza, Rachmaninoff writes an alternative, a so-called ossia, and it is one of those moments where he's asking his interpreters, 'Are you Rach-man-enough?'"
>
> Tom Service, commentator (34:24)[1]

In a world where success is measured in financial terms and where the business of business is to increase profits, artists are considered outsiders. Although a few stars achieve global fame, capturing our collective imagination, in the main, artists live in obscurity and seem to contribute little to economic prosperity. What, though, if that world was turned on its head and artists were considered as central to our wellbeing? In this paper, I explore this possibility, recruiting Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873 – 1943) as both guide and partner in this quest, noting in particular his recovery from depression after the first performance of his Symphony No. 1 in D minor, Op 13, as we collectively seek to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 has imposed a time of self-reflection, giving us an opportunity to imagine the kind of world we want to inhabit. Although we can return to life as we know it, the pandemic also offers the gift of time and space to reflect and change course. Questions about the future revolve around the financial survival of families and businesses, with economic considerations driving discussions. What, though, of the arts?

Assessing the place of artists in society has become a compelling agenda during and post the COVID-19 pandemic. Community shutdowns across the globe placed an unwelcome full stop on public activities of all kinds. The arts sector suffered as much, if not more, than others because artists already work under tight financial constraints. The prospect of no work for several years sent shockwaves through the industry, and this occurred in most jurisdictions. For example, Caust[2] notes that in her Australian experience, even though the arts are central to collective well-being and identity, the federal government was unable or unwilling to support the sector already suffering from inadequate investment during COVID-19. Notwithstanding this paucity, Lee *et al.*[3] observed that across the globe, disabled artists found ways of using digital platforms to express their creativity, while Bell[4] explored how musicians used enforced isolation to experiment on digital platforms. Jacobs *et al.*[5] go further and advocate for a social revolution in a post-pandemic world, led by artists.

Fomenting revolution is a major agenda, and in straightened times, when money is tight, the arts take a back seat. This is especially the case with live performances, where, notwithstanding the health risks of large crowds gathering in enclosed spaces, funds from audience members barely cover costs. In the case of symphony orchestras, funding can be divided into three roughly equal segments: local and State governments, sponsorships and donations, and box office receipts. Although during lockdowns across the globe, many orchestras live-streamed concerts, some without charge,[6] the lack of paying public placed these companies at risk.

Given the sum of economic factors and the limited discretionary money available to families, are the arts in general, and live music performances in particular, necessary? Can they be kept in the shadows until prosperity returns and societies are on a more stable financial footing?

2. The foundational role of the arts

Taking the gift of time and space that the pandemic offered, we might rethink the place of the arts in the new post-COVID-19 world, we choose to create. Rather than being optional, frivolous add-ons to busy lives, the arts are crucial to our collective sense of well-being, and this became most obvious when art galleries were closed and live performances were canceled.

Convery[7] reported a sense of frustration at not being able to attend the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra's canceled concert featuring Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* in March 2020. She also reported being deeply affected as she watched the live-streamed performance, noting the "moment of beauty and relief [offered] to anyone who needed it." Convery's testimonial reflects the sense of loss we feel when art is removed and the ability of artists to fill that gap by available means.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affirmed the centrality of the arts in human affairs. To be sure, this is not a new discovery; they have always been focal, despite preoccupations with financial concerns. Several historical events confirm this stance.

Young,[8] in his movie *The Art of Recovery*, explores the role artists played in reviving a barren landscape after the 2011 disastrous earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand. Citizens found ways to sing, dance, make visual art, and grow vegetables amidst the destruction. These activities became essential morale boosters and provided the social glue necessary to ensure community solidarity when all else was uncertain.

A further example of the sense of consolation that the arts bring is in Ernst Gordon's[9] first-hand account of working as a prisoner of war on the infamous Death Railway from Burma to Thailand during World War II. The story that Gordon recounts is of men exhausted from marching, suffering from dysentery and starvation, looking forward to their ration of rice. A makeshift orchestra was playing Schubert's Unfinished Symphony, and as they heard the sounds, they stopped and sat down to listen. "The rice could wait," Gordon wrote. He summed up the extraordinary experience:

> "While they listened, their faces came to life. When the music had ended, they rose reluctantly, one by one. I heard a little skeleton of a man say to his companion with feeling, 'God, that was lovely – bloody lovely!'" (p. 143)[9]

Himself a prisoner, Gordon understood the importance of this encounter music amidst death and squalor. He reflected that "there are two kinds of food – one for the body and one for the soul," noting that the "latter is more satisfying." (p. 143)[9]

It is not surprising, then, that when communities shut down during the COVID-19 pandemic, people turned to internet streaming services to access music performances. Denk *et al.*[10] explored live and streamed music performances in the German context before and

during the pandemic. Their data showed a surprising preference for premium services provided by platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, and Amazon Music (p. 17)[10] over free offerings. People were prepared to pay for this essential service!

The digital age in which we live provided an unforeseen opportunity for artists to collaborate and communicate in innovative ways. For example, Reason[11] reported growth in online engagement, a factor especially salient for disabled people. He noted that software applications like Creative Doodle Book helped broker creative expression helped both to manage the immediate crisis from imposed lockdown and to discover new ways of interacting within these constraints.

The Artwork Archive[12] website noted paradoxically that "social distancing actually forced us to get closer, virtually," while Drake *et al.*[13] observed that people gravitated to the arts, particularly listening to music, as a way of coping with the emotional stressors during the pandemic. Of all the arts available, Bradbury *et al.*[14] reported that listening to music was a crucial factor in dealing with the emotional rollercoaster of the pandemic.

The arts console, but they also cajole. Beyond the solace that they bring, the arts also have an important political function, playing a necessary part in alerting society to key problems and prescribing possible solutions. Theall[15] makes this assessment in his summations of Marshall McLuhan's influence as a communicator. McLuhan, Theall described, habitually made sense of popular memes by reframing them. He notes,

> "[McLuhan's] poetic ability that allowed him to appropriate phrases from others, such as the term linearity from Dorothy Lee, and turn them into his own multi-faceted probes or to convert Ezra Pound's aphorism 'Artists are the antennae of the race' (Pound n.d., 81) into his description of the poet as an 'early warning system,' alluding to the then-topical Dew Line that used radar to provide early alerts of air or missile attacks." (p. 29)[15]

Such claims place artists at the center of our world, relocated from galleries, museums, and concert chambers to town squares and piazzas, rehabilitated from the margins to the warp and woof of political, social, and business affairs. Unlike business leaders, whom McLuhan assessed as planning through a rear-view mirror, artists warn and advise, scoping possibilities for life ahead.

If the arts are so necessary for personal and social well-being and provide cues for change, perhaps they should be center stage of the world we choose to create. Ibbotson[16] goes further, arguing that artists should rule the world. This is not because artists are superior characters but rather because they understand the process. He writes, "the arts represent a body of knowledge that is profoundly useful to society, not only in the content of finished works but also in the skills, practices, and disciplines of artists themselves." (p. 129) Notwithstanding the totalitarian gesture of Ibbotson's claim and one which artists would reject, he reveals an important step in how we might remake our world. As artists move from the fringes and work in community with businesses and other social groups, together, we can remake our world in an egalitarian spirit of shared inquiry and action.

Artists carry a heavy burden, and such an agenda assumes that artists are themselves emotionally well, as Whitley *et al.*[17] argue. This strikes at the heart of this paper's purpose of seeking an exemplar who may be both a guide and partner in recrafting our world. Other artists have trudged a weary path through disillusionment, depression, and hardship, emerging to become significant voices for others to gain inspiration and encouragement. Russian composer and performer Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873 – 1943) is an example of a man who suffered a failure, a debilitating mental health breakdown, and recovery to become the most well-known pianist of his generation. Rachmaninoff is a useful model due to the many struggles and privations he experienced throughout his life. Learnings from his story can help us chart a course ahead at this time.

Sergei Rachmaninoff's early professional life as a composer was prolific until the first performance of Symphony No. 1 in D minor, Op 13, which he completed in 1895 as a 22 years old and which was first performed in St Petersburg on March 28, 1897. Lasting for almost 1 h, writing it and then preparing for its first performance was a major undertaking, and it was Rachmaninoff's first foray into the daunting world of symphonic writing, requiring a deft touch in handling the large variety of hues and colors of the late Romantic orchestra. Success in this medium could enable him to make his mark as a composer of repute.

What began with such promise turned out to be a disaster, the orchestra was poorly prepared by the conductor for its premiere, and the performance was riddled with mistakes. As a result, it was panned by the critics, sending Rachmaninoff into a potentially career-ending slump. This failure, depression, and recovery is the story of an artist who learned to make bold music statements along with the necessary skills to deal with the harsh world of organizational politics with its patch-protections and petty jealousies.

Rachmaninoff is also an apt exemplar for this study because he worked his way through his crisis of confidence, made peace with his multiple motivations, and found a

way of making his unique contribution to humanity. His is a story of a man who worked hard to achieve a high level of personal skill, of discovering the necessary diplomatic skills to deal with ornery colleagues, and of reconciling himself to his personal circumstances to lead a satisfying life as a teacher, composer, and performer. Through an archaeology of Rachmaninoff's sense of failure, there are lessons that artists today can learn and, in turn, lead society toward wellness in the post-pandemic environment.

3. Anatomy of failure and success

Rachmaninoff is exemplary in the way he handled near-career-ending failure and his process of recovery. His is an important story due to his ability to marshal internal resources while drawing on support from mentors to become an artist whose works resonate with audiences today. He is both the consoler and antennae of our race.

The first symphony carries many of the harmonic and tonal features that became hallmarks of Rachmaninoff's mature style. In this symphony, he finds his voice, making bold declamations, stretching the orchestral resources, and placing advanced technical demands on all musicians. It builds on, and indeed breaks with the works of his role model, Tchaikovsky[18], and gives hints to the classical traditions championed by Beethoven. Yet the first performance was a disaster, causing Rachmaninoff to retreat into himself. For 2 years, Rachmaninoff suffered from what we might today call "writer's block."

What should have been a celebration of this young man's creativity, the performance of the first symphony, instead became the target of scorn. The notable and somewhat caustic critic of the day, César Cui, wrote:

> "If there is a Conservatory in Hell, and one of the gifted pupils should be given the problem of writing a programmatic symphony on the Seven Plagues of Egypt, and if he should write a symphony resembling Mr. Rachmaninoff's symphony – his problem would have been carried out brilliantly, and he would enchant all the inmates of Hell." (p. 71–72)[19]

Such a crushing assessment, on top of the unexpected deaths of his mentor Tchaikovsky and teacher Zverev, sent Rachmaninoff into paralyzing depression. A profound apathy descended on Rachmaninoff, rendering him unable to compose forcing him to seek therapeutic help. Regular sessions of hypnotherapy with Dr. Nikolay Dahl and teaching and conducting contracts gave Rachmaninoff the impetus to return to composing. As a direct result of Dahl's interventions, which included simple repetitions of the intention to write music again, he began composing his second piano concerto, completing the first two movements in 1900, with a first performance of the entire work in 1901. Rachmaninoff had expressed to Dahl his desire to write another piano concerto, recollecting:

> "Dahl had asked what manner of composition they desired and had received the answer, 'A Concerto for pianoforte,' for this I had promised to the people in London and had given it up in despair. Consequently, I heard the same hypnotic formula repeated day after day while I lay half asleep in an armchair in Dahl's study. 'You will begin to write your Concerto…You will work with great facility…The Concerto will be of an excellent quality…' It was always the same, without interruption. Although it may sound incredible, this cure really helped me." (p. 112)[20]

The treatment was so effective that Rachmaninoff began to feel the once familiar creative urges reawakening within him. He reported that "the material grew in bulk, and new musical ideas began to stir within me," (p. 112)[20] writing what is perhaps one of his most popular works today – his second piano concerto. It is not surprising that Rachmaninoff dedicated the concerto to Dahl and his interventions.

This raises several questions about how people develop resources to cope with crises while at the same time keeping faith with their life purpose. Certainly, Rachmaninoff formed a visceral and abiding distaste for his first symphony, which developed when attending rehearsals, and on hearing the first performance while hiding on the fire escape outside the St Petersburg theater. He had poured himself into this work, focusing solely on completing it at the expense of other projects, and he had, perhaps mistakenly, decided that public reaction to its first performance would confirm for him his life's direction. One of Rachmaninoff's composition teachers at the Moscow Conservatory, Sergei Ivanovich Taneyev, had seen the almost finished score and, although he was aware of "several instances of harmonic pretentiousness," he considered the work was "unquestionably a talented one." (p. 70)[19] This affirmation had spurred Rachmaninoff on, giving him the impetus to complete it.

But what began as a ground-breaking creative work became a source of horror to the point where Rachmaninoff refused to have it performed again during his lifetime, and in his will, he requested that manuscripts be destroyed. Indeed, it only exists now in the orchestral repertoire because the individual instrumental parts survived his executor's furnace.

For sure, Rachmaninoff had considerable self-belief in the symphony when the written score was complete. While he recognized there were some compositional failings, he also thought that it was the performance of it was

inadequate. He wrote to his friend Zatayevich: "either, like some composers, I am unduly partial to this composition, or this composition was poorly performed. And this is what really happened." (p. 73)[19] This blunt personal assessment provides the raw materials which might guide artists today; namely, to maintain a healthy separation from the composition and an ability to deal graciously with those who will perform the work.

Perhaps he was too vested in his composition to have any sense of objective assessment of it. Moreover, this is not surprising because creative works must necessarily come from intense and prolonged concentrated effort. However, there were signs in the work that could have accounted for Rachmaninoff's sense of failure. There is no doubt that it formed a turning point and set Rachmaninoff on a path of performer rather than composer. As Findeisen, a more generous music critic of the time, wrote:

> "Rachmaninoff's symphony is the product of a composer who has not yet fully found himself. At this point, he could become either a musical crackpot or Brahms." (p. 72)[19]

What he did to "find himself" and recruit the resources necessary to keep his career alive is the focus of what follows. To explore this, several issues are salient, namely, the role of mentors, the risks of making bold statements, and how to move beyond a profound and debilitating sense of failure.

4. Mentors

While art-making relies to some degree on individual talent, creativity is nurtured in the community. Indeed, as Sampson[21] argues, although the individual self is formed and functions independent from society, "individuals are [also] constituted by their communities." (p. 919) Herein is the paradox of the artist: freedom to experiment alone with ideas is enhanced by peers, supporters, and those who differ. Creativity is both an individual and communal pursuit.

Johansson[22] presents a compelling case for this creativity paradox. Drawing on the image of the Florentine House of Medici in 15th-century Italy, the Medici name symbolizes the burst of innovation that occurs when people of difference work together. Johansson writes of this as intersectional thinking, as ideas traverse beyond discipline boundaries to welcome sometimes contradictory insights.

As the developing artist tries out different processes and practices, mentors help by supporting expressions of what Ibarra[23] calls the "provisional self," identities that begin as "makeshift, until they have been rehearsed and refined with experience." (p. 767) In the process of developing a distinctive artistic practice, mentors support by offering advice and by helping create space for these experimentations to occur.[24] That means that mentors play a significant role in affirming, pushing, critiquing, and supporting artists as they take tentative steps toward their formation.

Mentoring differs from the college or tertiary training environment, where instructors expose students to a wide range of ideas and competencies, involving them in "taster" activities that allow the student to find their unique pathways. Where education is general, and educationalists explore many diverse areas with students, mentors fulfill a support role within the world where the protégé is functioning.[25] Mentors work in specific areas of competence, and although the relationship is significant and important, contact is perhaps much less than with teachers from the past.

With the support of his mentors, Rachmaninoff took the risk that all artists must take to make his work public. As Maisel[26] advises, artists must have a degree of confidence in their work when they expose it to the public, and their sense of self-belief "safeguards [them] from the dangers of receiving [harsh] responses." (p. 215) Mentors strengthen this necessary self-assurance, for without it, artists lack the ego strength to combat inner doubt and outer naysayers.

A mentor prompts and even goads from the wings off-stage, providing political skills necessary to survive, all the while helping their protégé avoid the traps of an arrogant self-belief. They offer "privileged information [that] is provided only to the chosen 'insiders' and withheld from the 'outsiders,'" (p. 6)[27] grounding protégés in the political and cultural realities of their world, beyond the somewhat idealistic training received from educational institutions.

Rachmaninoff's story demonstrates the important shift from the influence of the teacher, Zverev, in his case, to that of a mentor, Tchaikovsky. It was Zverev who imposed disciplines, and who gave him the necessary technical skills for him to make music his profession. However, their relationship became fractious, and eventually, Rachmaninoff renounced his tutelage and, in 1889, left Zverev's house, moving in with a fellow student. They eventually reconciled and 1892 when Zverev acknowledged that Rachmaninoff, indeed, was an excellent composer.

Tchaikovsky, on the other hand, encouraged Rachmaninoff to continue to stretch his compositional boundaries, even though Tchaikovsky was not particularly pleased with Rachmaninoff's early work. For example, in 1890, Rachmaninoff had accepted a commission to transcribe Tchaikovsky's *The Sleeping Beauty* for piano, yet Tchaikovsky was appalled at Rachmaninoff's "unimaginative efforts." (p. 8)[28] The young composer wrote

to his friend Natalya Skalon, "Tchaikovsky criticizes me terribly for the transcription, quite reasonably and justly. Of all transcriptions, mine is undoubtedly the worst." (p. 8)[28] Tchaikovsky had written of his profound disappointment at Rachmaninoff's transcription, declaring, "In general, inexperience and lack of boldness can be sensed at every step." (p. 35)[19] Later revisions appeased Tchaikovsky, and yet, interestingly, Rachmaninoff was not crushed by this brutal assessment of his mentor.

Tchaikovsky taught Rachmaninoff important diplomatic skills, especially when speaking to conductors. A composer can be sensitive about their work, and equally, a conductor, when preparing that work for performance, may be defensive about his or her role as artist-in-chief. In 1893, the two composers, Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff, attended rehearsals of *Aleko,* which was to be performed at the Moscow Grand Theater under the baton of Ippolit Altani. Rachmaninoff recalled:

> "I cannot describe how thrilled I was at the orchestral sound of my own music. I was in the seventh heaven. Tchaikovsky attended the last three rehearsals. We sat together in a corner of the darkened house. Altani's conception of some parts did not please me. I remember the following dialogue between Tchaikovsky and myself:
> Tchaikovsky: 'Do you like this tempo?'
> Myself: 'No.'
> Tchaikovsky: 'Why don't you tell them?'
> Myself: 'I am afraid.'
> However, Tchaikovsky could not stand it for long, and during an interval, he cleared his throat and said: 'Mr. Rachmaninoff and I think that the tempo here might be taken a little quicker.'
> He was always scrupulously polite in making such suggestions." (p. 86–87)[20]

Further, Rachmaninoff reported how much he valued Tchaikovsky's affirmation. In 1893, his opera *Aleko* was to be performed. Remembering back on that period, Rachmaninoff wrote:

> "I think success depended not so much on the quality of the opera as much as on Tchaikovsky's attitude toward it, for he liked it very much. By the way, at one of the rehearsals, Tchaikovsky said to me, 'I have just finished a two-act [sic] opera *Iolanta*, which is not long enough to take up a whole evening. Would you object to its being performed with your opera?' He literally said: 'Would you object...?' He was 53, a famous composer, but I was a novice of 20! Tchaikovsky, of course, attended the premiere of *Aleko*, and at his insistence, the director of the Imperial Theaters Vsevolozhsky came from St Petersburg. At the end of the opera, Tchaikovsky, leaning out of the box, applauded with all his might, realizing how this would help a new composer." (p. 18)[28]

What clues, then, does Rachmaninoff's relationship with Tchaikovsky offer about how artists receive support early on in their careers? Mentors are not necessarily enamored of their protégé. There are times when mentors call their mentees to account and challenge some of their prevailing logic. Thus, this relationship must be marked by high levels of trust,[29] for without this underpinning, those stark realities may inhibit rather than encourage. Further, an environment of reciprocity is established where both parties give and receive.[30] The mentoring relationship, then, is one that is fecund and can be mutually supportive and productive for both parties.

This was the case with another of Rachmaninoff's mentors, Rimsky-Korsakov. The young musician had studied Rimsky-Korsakov's compositions and had even contemplated leaving Moscow and returning to St Petersburg to study with him. Rimsky-Korsakov had taken an interest in Rachmaninoff's career and attended rehearsals of the first symphony. His assessment, though diplomatic, was blunt. As Rachmaninoff later wrote:

> "The work made a very bad impression on the St Petersburg musicians who were present. 'Forgive me, but I do not find this music at all agreeable,' said Rimsky-Korsakov to me in his dry and unsparing manner at a rehearsal." (p. 98)[20]

Yet, as Garcia[31] records, Rachmaninoff was able to "shake off his former prejudices and become rather close friends with Rimsky-Korsakov." (p. 22) This change in attitude represented a new openness on Rachmaninoff's part, in that he set aside "all my Muscovite prejudice against the great St Petersburg composer" (p. 127);[31] an openness that is a necessary forerunner to becoming a successful artist.

Rachmaninoff did not have such a productive relationship with Galzunov, however. In 1896, the music publisher Mitrofan Belyayev had agreed to a performance of the first symphony, and because Galzunov had conducted a performance of *The Rock* in that year, Rachmaninoff wrote to him requesting that he conduct the symphony at the proposed 1897 Russian Symphony Concert funded by Belyayev. Glazunov agreed but was cavalier in his attitude. Rachmaninoff was rightly aggrieved. Glazunov was "drunk on the podium" (p. 23)[28] and in a letter to his composer friend, Alexander Zatayevich, some 5 weeks after the performance, complained,

> "I am amazed how such a highly talented man as Glazunov can conduct so badly. I am not speaking now of his conducting technique (one cannot ask that

> of him) but about his musicianship. He feels nothing when he conducts. It is as if he understands nothing." (p. 23)[28]

Certainly, Rachmaninoff had approached Glazunov in good faith, expecting that the conductor would give his best in preparing the orchestra for the first performance. What, then, would account for Glazunov's apparent dismissal of the symphony? Was it professional jealousy? Or was Glazunov trying to communicate something to Rachmaninoff, although in a very clumsy and inappropriate manner? Here is evidence that it can all go horribly wrong when mentors are too "frank and willing to challenge," (p. 95)[32] and unable to couch their criticisms in a constructive manner.

Perhaps Galzunov understood only too well Rachmaninoff's compositional intentions and considered it an impoverished work from the outset. Although this is mere speculation, there are clues within the music itself that could explain Galzunov's lack of enthusiasm for the symphony. There is evidence within the symphony that Rachmaninoff was prepared to take risks with his orchestration and tonalities, but perhaps they were ill-considered.

5. Risk-taking and its limits

The first symphony came on the back of a fertile period for Rachmaninoff. In 1892, he received the highest accolade for composition in his final year at the Moscow Conservatoire, the much-coveted Great Gold Medal for his one-act opera *Aleko*. He, then, went on and wrote a fantasy for two pianos, an orchestral fantasy, *The Rock*, inspired by Chekhov's short story *Na puti* (On the Way), and several other works. His fecundity was even noted by Tchaikovsky, who said:

> "'Well, Sergei, what do I hear? You have already started to write 'masterpieces'! Congratulations, congratulations.' [Then], he wrung his hands in mock despair and exclaimed: 'And I, miserable wretch, have only written one Symphony!' He was referring to the 'Pathetique' his last composition." (p. 20)[31]

However, Rachmaninoff had yet to write something on the scale of a symphony. Thus, when he embarked on his first foray into this grand world, it was a bold step in his career at such an early age.

The symphony is set in D Minor and begins with a dramatic declamation. It opens with a three-note flourish in the woodwind section, then a unison note, D, played by the woodwinds and brass, followed by a descending melody, again in unison, played by the strings with the instruction that they play all the notes with down bows, thus making for a heavy texture. The tempo marking is slow, *Grave*, with the instruction to play an extremely loud *fff*.

This is not a subtle suggestion of ideas but rather a bold statement of intent. Conductors would instruct the musicians to play *molto vibrato* to cover for the intonation difficulties of unison playing and to produce a rich romantic sound. An orchestra not on its metal could easily produce an irritating scratchy sound, making Rachmaninoff seem more like a rabble-rouser than an artiste.

The figure that opens the symphony is retained by Rachmaninoff through all four movements. While changes in orchestral timbre and dynamics allow it to be refreshed, there is little development of this central idea. Whereas Beethoven would take a small figure, like the "Fate Motif" of the 5th Symphony,[33] and work it thoroughly from its initial statement, Rachmaninoff seemed unable to give any further life to this opening statement.

Rachmaninoff became overcommitted to a single idea, something that artists (and business leaders) need to be wary of. While a new concept might emerge that might be innovative and intriguing, if that idea does not develop and morph over time, its inherent potential can be thwarted. Over-commitment can blind us to alternative conceptions.

The coda of the last movement finishes the symphony as it began, with the entire orchestra in full voice playing *fff*. Rachmaninoff demonstrates his facility with the Western harmonic tradition and two great forces within the orchestra working against each other in contrary motion with a rising bass and descending upper line. In Western music, parallel lines are considered "weak," whereas contrary motion is a concept drilled into composition students from the outset of their studies due to the perceived strength of these opposing forces.

Like at the opening of the symphony, there is nothing subtle here. The crossing lines conclude with a loud clash of the gong, reminiscent of Tchaikovsky's second symphony (*The Little Russian* [1872]). Tchaikovsky, in his second symphony, toward the end of the final movement, increases the dramatic intensity, bringing the work to a complete halt with loud-sounding chords in the brass and woodwind, culminating with one strike of the gong followed by a pause (measures 647 – 651). This draws the listeners' attention to the richness of the gong's tonalities, and Tchaikovsky gives time for its impact to be heard. It is a subtle statement, and by pausing, Tchaikovsky allows the gong to enhance the richness of the texture. The work then picks up again at full speed, concluding with a coda.

Where Tchaikovsky uses the gong as a condiment, adding a little seasoning, Rachmaninoff over-spices the dish. Where our appetite may have been satiated with one

strike from the instrument, he adds further strikes at the beginning of each chord as if to reinforce that the end is coming. Where listeners might enjoy sonic subtleties, the effect Rachmaninoff achieves is bloating. What may have seemed like a good idea during the conceptualization of the work becomes a distraction in its realization. For Tchaikovsky, the gong is a comma in the musical line, whereas for Rachmaninoff, it is a repeated exclamation mark!

It is in these final chords that Rachmaninoff ultimately loses his courage. He finishes the work on 11 repeated D notes prepared by a semi-tone figure $C^{\#}$–D–E^{b}–D–B. However, instead of leaving us with the tonal mysteries and ambiguities inherent in this figure, he reconciles and resolves all questions with a final tripartite repetition of the tonic, dominant relationship D–A, thereby reinforcing a D tonality.

I think that, ultimately, it was this ending (Figure 1) that finally sent Rachmaninoff running out into the anonymity of the evening streets as he sought relief from his acute sense of failure.

6. After failure…falling forward

Success is a very poor tutor, and her influences are sometimes blinding;[32] whereas failure, although painful at the time, is by far the better teacher. We so hate failure that we have all but eliminated the idea from our contemporary rhetoric. 'Success' is the mantra of business along with "growth" and "efficiency;" it has become the purpose of business leaders. However, the hubris attached to notions of success inures us against the rich learning that failure can bring. As McGrath[34] observes about entrepreneurs learning their craft,

> "One reason why failure offers benefits is because it is often easier to pinpoint why a failure has occurred than to explain a success, making failure analysis a powerful mechanism for resolving uncertainty." (p. 28)[34]

The learning for Rachmaninoff was in the power of suggestion. Overstatement can eventually cause listeners to disengage and ignore what they can come to perceive as a nagging voice. Rachmaninoff had to learn to open space, to leave blanks in his texts, and to invite perceivers to creatively invest in engaging with his work. Furthermore, Rachmaninoff was intent on separating himself from his mentor and father figure, Tchaikovsky, as Garcia[31] claims and the repeated gong was a bold statement of his individuation. However, he failed to pull it off.

As a student, Rachmaninoff had learned intellectually how to deal with the orchestra's sonorities; now, as a practitioner early in his career, he discovered esthetically the powerful resources that were under his command. Through his failure, he learned the power of understatement, and this is revealed in his second symphony of 1907.

Comparing the openings of both symphonies reveals considerable learning on Rachmaninoff's part. Where in the first, he is bold and declamatory; in the second

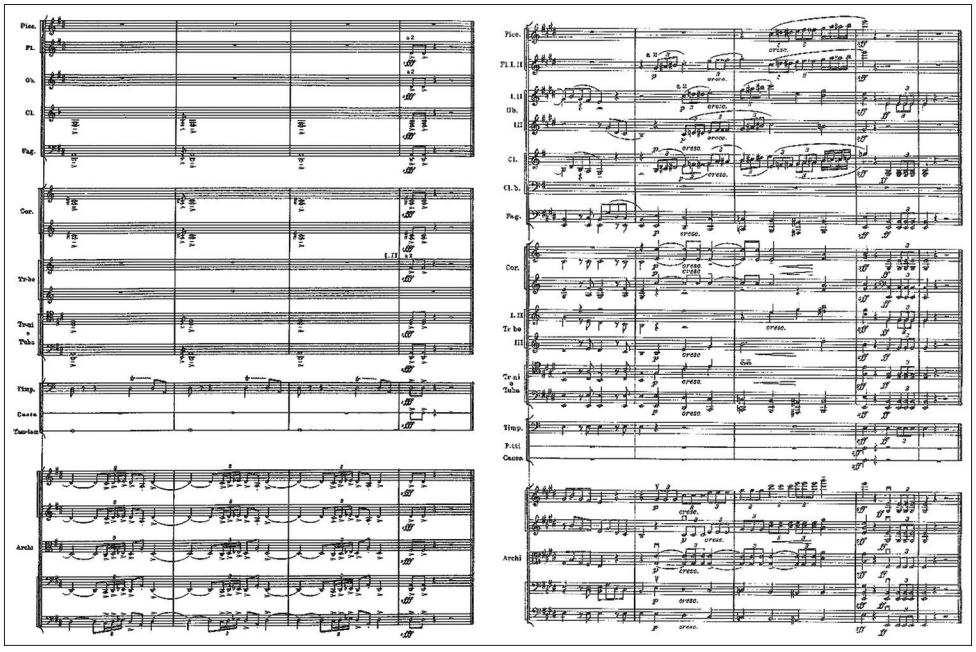

Figure 1. The comparison of the closing page of Symphonies 1 and 2.

(E minor, Op. 27), the opening is muted and suggestive, beginning with a small breath-like figure in the cellos and basses.

Both are set at similar speeds, but in the first, his intention is to elevate the consciousness of the listener to the solemnity of the music with the *Grave* tempo and the repeated down strokes of the string instruments. The second symphony is set in *Largo,* which is suggestive of a less rigorous statement of intent. The slurring marks require the performers to group their notes in longbows, sustaining the energy throughout but very softly. Figure 2 compares the first pages of the two orchestral scores.

The codas of both symphonies are quite different, too. In the final movement of the second symphony, Rachmaninoff explores the "breath" motif by developing it, elongating and inverting it, deploying it throughout the orchestra texture but without overstating it. The final statements of the symphonies, then, reveal two quite different scenarios. Where the first symphony all but blasts the listener with the repeated triplet figure closing with two very loud and "forced" chords, the second symphony ends with the two outer lines moving in opposite directions in contrary motion – the bass and cello lines descending while the violins and woodwind ascend; a much more elegant and perhaps more dramatic closure.

Rachmaninoff's failure taught him invaluable lessons, probably the most important being that as a performer or composer, it is all about the audience – the perceiving public who responds to an artist's promptings. No matter how gifted the musician or how talented the artist, the perceivers are those who concretize and bring the work into existence.

Rachmaninoff learned how to communicate his art effectively and elegantly. As a performer, recordings of his piano playing reveal a man who, according to Norris,[35] was one of the best pianists that has graced concert halls across the globe. Certainly, he was the finest pianist of his era in Russia. However, it was not only his advanced technique that singled him out; he also knew how to connect emotionally with audiences. In 1915, he was touring Russia, and in his first Moscow concert, during the interval, he was found by his writer and poet friend, Marietta Shaginyan, in a very dark mood. He exclaimed: "Didn't you notice that I missed the point? Don't you understand – I let the point slip!" (p. 195)[19] The display of his advanced technique was not his purpose. He wanted to communicate with his audiences, and while he acknowledged that composers craft their music with a sense of climax, Rachmaninoff understood that the performer also must attend to the narrative arc of the music. Thus,

> "On a later occasion, he explained that each piece he plays is shaped around its culminating point: the whole mass of sounds must be so measured, the depth and power of each sound must be given with such purity and gradation that this peak point is achieved with an appearance of the greatest naturalness, though actually, its accomplishment is the highest art. This

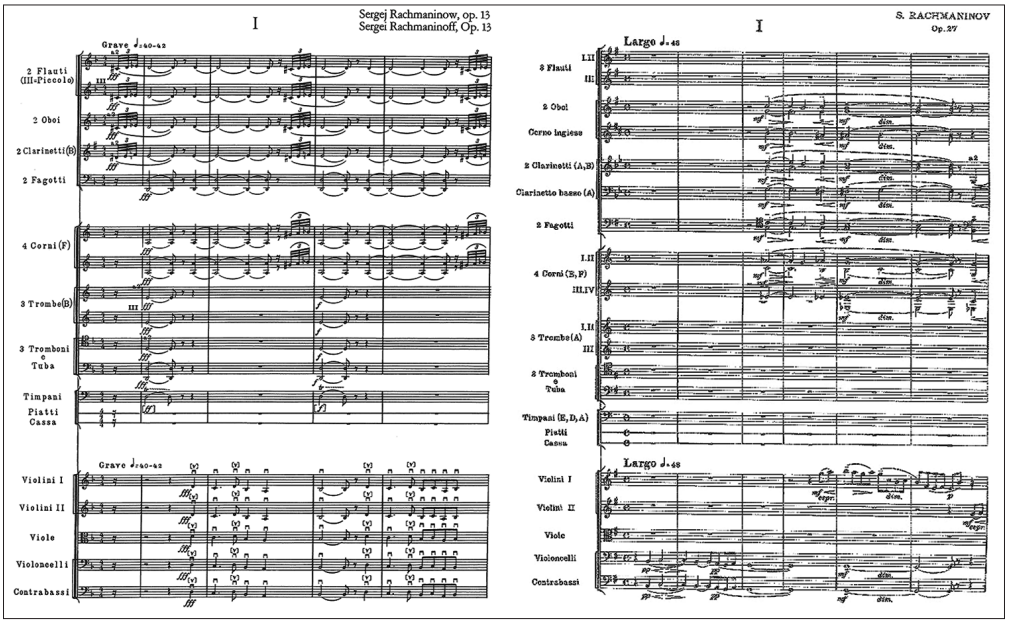

Figure 2. The comparison of the opening page of Symphonies 1 and 2.

> moment must arrive with the sound and sparkle of a ribbon snapped at the end of a race – it must seem a liberation from the last material obstacle, the last barrier between truth and its expression." (p. 195)[19]

Audience adulation was not his measure of success. Rather, it was that he had conveyed a sense of meaning and achieved an emotional connection with audiences through his performance. Here, he reveals an ability to reflect *in* and *on* his own practice,[36] and to make changes necessary to retain the integrity of his work. While he wanted to communicate profoundly to audiences, he was not swayed by their admiration, continually trying to refine his performance to meet his own expectations. Indeed, "At one of his concerts, while the audience was wild with enthusiasm, he was backstage tearing his hair because the point had slipped." (p. 195)[19]

This despair was not debilitating, however. For, another result of the failure of his first symphony and the support he gained from his mentors throughout his early life meant that he had the inner resources necessary to reflect on his performance. Although knowing that he had not met his own expectations, he was still able to carry on without being incapacitated.

7. From dependence to independence

Rachmaninoff's experiences of failure, depression, and recovery were important for his long-term professional career. The disaster of his first symphony was a crucible experience, which, as Bennis and Thomas[37] note, is transformative, providing the developing leader with an "adaptive capacity" (p. 45) born out of trauma. Rachmaninoff would not realize at the time the significance of his ability to come back from a potentially career-ending slump, and under normal circumstances, he would have been able to look forward to a long career as a composer and musician in his homeland. However, political events were to overtake him and his family with the onset of the Bolshevik revolution and the accompanying social upheavals in 1917. Finding himself on the wrong side of the political divide at the time, he rejected what he saw as the "vague Utopian illusions" of the revolutionaries and reported that:

> "the anarchy around me, the brutal uprooting of all the foundations of art, the senseless destruction of all means for its encouragement, left no hope of a normal life in Russia. I tried in vain to find an escape from this 'witches' Sabbath for myself and my family." (p. 185–186)[20]

He left with his family for Sweden on December 24, 1917, never to return to his mother country. His life as an émigré would pose new challenges, and the resilience he had developed as a young man would provide him with the strategies necessary to protect his family.

Although he kept composing, it was to the concert platform as a pianist and conductor that he turned for his future success. At age 44, having lost his estates and financial resources in Russia and needing to re-establish his life, he essentially began his career again to secure the financial resources necessary to settle in his new country. He would no longer be the prolific composer that Tchaikovsky applauded some 20 years prior, but instead offered audiences deeply spiritual encounters. As one critic wrote after a 1932 concert, "the imperishable beauty of this music is added to the spiritual wealth of the world, solace, a joy to treasure always in grateful memory." (p. 283)[19]

8. Rachmaninoff as post-pandemic guide and partner

As artists take a more central role, what of this world that we seek to create? Certainly, if we are to make a new world, we need to artistic imagination to envisage that world, says Burns.[38] If past pandemics are a guide, notably the Spanish Flu that swept the globe 1918 – 1920 is any guide, Monteiro[39] notes that new, provocative art forms are bound to emerge in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. For the performing arts, bringing subscribing audiences back to concert halls is proving a challenge,[40] but also presents an opportunity to educate and develop younger attendees, says Farber.

The National Arts Council of Singapore notes in their pandemic report[41] that the arts are crucial in creating social action and raising awareness, for example, of the Black Lives Matter movement. The visual arts provide a vehicle for people to advocate for social change through ease of sharing, says the report, and this has been made easier through the growth of digital arts.

One of the unexpected impacts of the pandemic was the absence of motor vehicles on city streets. This had the effect of reducing carbon emissions but also of giving space for artists to reimagine city life without cars, as Camille Walala has done in her revision of a busy London street.[42] Further, as Drymer[43] reports, galleries and museums have become more inclusive of alternative forms, including street and public art. This has the effect, she says, of keeping the "spirit of communal art alive" (p. 6) and of helping develop innovative solutions and social initiatives.

In the United States of America, the American Rescue Plan Act, signed by President Jo Biden in March 2021 to stimulate post-pandemic recovery, presented an open invitation to and funds for artists to collaborate with local developments. For example, Zabel[44] reports on artists' involvement in the light rail transit construction in Minnesota, making local culture more visible. The presence of artists supports engineers as they work through design challenges by understanding the creative process.

Making the arts central to social and business activities in the post-pandemic world creates a virtuous circle where artists reflect on their practice, morphing and changing in the process,[45] while adding value to non-arts activities such as constructing roads, bridges, railways, and buildings. Fulfilling this agenda is a major undertaking, and Rachmaninoff provides resources for us to draw on to realize our ambitions.

Rachmaninoff died over 70 years ago; yet, his legacy lives on in concert halls around the globe. Any orchestra that performs the second or third piano concertos will guarantee full houses. In particular, the third piano concerto (D minor, Op. 30) makes demands on soloists that seem almost super-human, as shown in the epigraphs that open this paper. In this concerto, he demonstrated that he had recovered from the debilitating depression that nearly ended his composing career and went on to create a work of dazzling brilliance. This is not just due to the display of technical wizardry that a soloist may show on stage. Indeed, it is that the music itself offers a sense of consolation to audience members.

Rachmaninoff has made a profound contribution to humanity, and his ability to connect with us even beyond the grave through his compositions continues to stir our imaginations and move our hearts. His compositions are not radical harmonically or structurally, but they lead listeners to emotional encounters that are deeply felt. This ability to move people emotionally developed out of the rich collegial environment in which he grew up and his period of depression.

Artists do not work in isolation but in the community. Although Rachmaninoff possessed advanced talents, he learned his craft through long hours of practice and oftentimes severe supervision, and as he developed as a composer, those around him played an important role in his formation. His love affairs, seen in the dedication of his song Op 4, "Oh, no, I beg you, don't forsake me" to "AL" Anna Lodyzhenskya, the Gypsy wife of Pyotr Lodyzhensky reveals "a hopeless infatuation," (p. 65)[19] a "passionate and powerful [nature] over which he struggled to maintain control throughout his life." (p. 24)[18]

The professional friendships he developed and the mentors who worked with him were all crucial to his learning. These helped to navigate the treacherous politics of his world, skills that enabled him to live well in a new country while maintaining a lifelong emotional connection with the spirit of his homeland. In effect, Rachmaninoff learned to develop his own network of relationships and to "strategically navigate" (p. 389)[46] his way through the plethora of competing interests within those networks.

He learned very quickly that some people may be supportive and trustworthy, as were Dr Dahl and Rimsky-Korsakov. He also recognized that some men could not be trusted despite their talents and reputation, as with Glazunov.

Obstructive and jealous colleagues may potentially thwart our development as we seek to express the voice that we have developed over time. Therefore, it is important to figure out those who are trustworthy, those who seek us harm, and those whom we imagined may have been opposed to us but who were instead only trying to help. Recovering from the kind of devastating sense of failure that Rachmaninoff experienced cannot usually be done alone. It requires sympathetic and supportive companions who understand the impacts on confidence levels and who have the kinds of skills necessary to help us through the dark periods of crippling self-doubt.[47] Moreover, it requires courage on our part to seek help from mentors, especially when we feel a loss of face that comes with public failure.

Certainly, sustaining a career as an artist involves continuous struggle, and the temptation to settle for an easier way is ever-present. Yet, the inner drive to create continually nags and presses for attention. Rachmaninoff was not the prolific composer in his later years that he was in his youth. Yet, his compositions are still performed, and they continue to engage audiences. The 1996 movie *Shine* celebrates the profundity of his compositions and the extreme difficulties performers have in learning his works. David Helfgott's story in that movie demonstrates the hues and complexities of Rachmaninoff's life. They both suffered from a sense of failure, and both make sense of that failure in their own unique ways.

Rachmaninoff's backstory to his celebrated works is in-and-of-itself interesting. However, his story has much to offer us today as we contemplate living in our post-pandemic world. We have choices to make.

There will be social, business, and political pressures to return to the past and to carry on as when we left off in January 2020. Yet, the pandemic has offered humanity a collective pause, time to reassess and reset how we want to live in the future.

Rachmaninoff may act as our guide as we tackle the residual mental and physical health issues that COVID-19 has brought in its wake. His treatment from Dr Dahl and mentoring from experienced seniors are examples of how we might recover. To be sure, we cannot recover alone, and as we recreate our communities, we can, together help share the burdens and joys of recovery.

Rachmaninoff's works continue to inspire, entertain, challenge, and console, all features that reinforce the

importance of the arts in our post-COVID-19 world. As Ibbotson[16] claims, "being an artist is a physical experience" (p. 129). Whether it is painted canvas, carved stone, or performed sound waves, art is physical, embodied in both the creator and perceiver.

Rachmaninoff also acts as a partner in our collective ambitions to create works that move people emotionally and physically. Such movement may not just come from pleasant art and often results from experiences of ugliness and dissonance. Artists are confronters who cajole, rebuke, and warn humanity, disturbing our comfortable ease with uncomfortable truths.

Making the connections between art and politics and acting as humanity's antennae is difficult to achieve. A clue might be found in the opening sequence of Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto (C minor, Op 18), the work he penned after his treatment with Dr Dahl. It stands out in the repertoire in that the piano begins before the orchestra.

The opening of the second piano concerto breaks with the tradition of the orchestra first establishing the themes, followed by the piano reiterating them. There were only several instances of this occurring before Rachmaninoff wrote the concerto. Beethoven began his 4th piano concerto (G major, Op 58) with the soloist playing the main theme with a radical twist. The piano begins in the home key and moves towards the dominant. The orchestra then plays the same theme, but in B major, a chromatic alteration that would have startled audiences.

Rachmaninoff's soloist opens with increasingly dissonant chord clusters moving from very soft to very loud, based on the subdominant F minor. There is a hint of the dominant on the last note in the left hand of the 8th bar before the resolution to the tonic in bar 9 and the orchestra entry at bar 11. The opening is notable in several ways. First, it places big demands on the soloist to control the gradual increase of volume while clustering the chords. Second, Rachmaninoff shows the strength of his recovery by mimicking the most radical of all composers: Beethoven.

The opening of the second piano concerto is not in any way modest, and this places Rachmaninoff at the forefront of our need to reconstruct our world post-COVID-19. He demonstrates that it is possible to be radical and revolutionary without being destructive or nihilistic. We can remake our world and achieve lasting change through beauty.[48] However, this cannot be achieved by artists alone, and where beauty is the guiding objective, we can work together in a spirit of goodness and goodwill, processes with which artists are familiar. This is the leadership required and which artists offer to achieve community renewal.

Rachmaninoff, as guide and partner, therefore, offers both inspiration and instruction. The artist's work is crucial as we conceive of a world that eschews measures of success based on growth and economic worth. His first symphony, though rarely performed, is masterful in its own way. He grew as a composer and performer from that first disastrous performance and is today a model of the artist's central place in our post-pandemic world.

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