

The Lyric's Rachmaninov Memorial

The most important artistic debut in Baltimore history is being commemorated here at The Lyric this evening, 2004 November 6, exactly 70 tropical years after the 1934 November 7 world premiere of Sergei Rachmaninov's renowned *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* at The Lyric Theatre (as The Lyric Opera House was then known) — with Rachmaninov himself at the piano.

The memorial we are unveiling will soon be permanently located within The Lyric. The 5-foot-wide 300 lb stone — star-galaxy black granite, engraved by Vladimir Leytush of Chesapeake Monuments — bears the following text:

Music is born only in the heart and speaks only to the heart.

Sergei Rachmaninov 1873-1943

At this place on 1934 November 7th, upon the stage of the Lyric Theatre, later renamed the Lyric Opera House, the leading pianist-composer of the 20th century, Sergei Rachmaninov of Russia, performed as soloist the world premiere of the immortal *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* — his ultimate composition for piano and orchestra — accompanied by the Philadelphia Orchestra with Leopold Stokowski as conductor.

To honor Sergei Rachmaninov's eternal musical heritage, its characteristic romantic heights and psychological depths, and to signify our City's lasting appreciation for & sponsorship of ennobling music, we gratefully dedicate this memorial on the 70th anniversary of the *Rhapsody's* Baltimore debut.

Presented to The Lyric and the Citizens of Maryland by: J. Avirett, Charles W. Cole, David Eaton, A. MacDonough Plant, Barbara & Dennis Rawlins, Christine Sarbanes, Ruth Weaver Williams.

While European cities are rich in premieres of the greatest musical works, the US has surprisingly few. And survival of the halls where they occurred has been rarer yet. Except for The Lyric and New York City's Carnegie Hall, it is difficult to think of a building anywhere in the Western Hemisphere which hosted the advent of a work of the Rachmaninov *Rhapsody's* high eminence — and is still devoted to regular performances of fine music. [The grand Piano Concerto #1 of Tchaikovsky (fatherly mentor to Rachmaninov, his top protégé) debuted in 1875 at the Boston Music Hall; but the hall was later gutted of all traces of its glorious past and hasn't hosted serious music for decades.]

The Philadelphia Orchestra — Rachmaninov's favorite — was chosen by him to premiere his last 5 orchestral works (1926-1941); and very roughly 10% of the Philadelphia's concert programs were performed to loyally subscribing audiences at The Lyric in Baltimore, throughout the middle of the 20th century. Thus, statistically, it was not an especially unlikely happenstance that one of the 5 premieres occurred here. And, of the 5 compositions, the *Rhapsody* has become by far the most beloved.

Rachmaninov soloed with the Philadelphia five times in Baltimore, always at The Lyric (info courtesy Darrin Britting, Librarian, Philadelphia Orchestra): 1927/3/30 *Piano Concerto #4*, 1934/11/7 *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, 1937/1/13 *Piano Concerto #2*, 1938/10/26 *Piano Concerto #1*, 1941/10/22 *Piano Concerto #4* (revised).

Sponsoring our memorial: James Avirett (Hazen&Sawyer), Charles Cole (CEO, Legg Mason Trust), David Eaton, A.M.Plant (Senior Partner: Stewart, Plant, & Blumenthal LLC), Barbara Rawlins (Loyola-Notre Dame Library), Dennis Rawlins (*DIO*), Christine Sarbanes (Gilman School faculty emerita), Ruth Williams (Gilman School faculty).

Postscript regarding the history of the work itself: The *Rhapsody* is now a standard in the piano-concert repertoire. Also a favorite of a variety of dance-artists. Five years after its Baltimore premiere, the work was even transformed into a Faustian ballet, *Paganini* (1939), by Mikhail Fokine. The *Rhapsody's* haunting 18th variation has become so well known that many find it eerily familiar without awareness of its origin. (In the Fokine-Rachmaninov ballet, this music represents the culmination of Paganini-Faust's romantic aspiration.) Moira *Red-Shoes* Shearer danced memorably & fatally to the 18th variation, in the well-known 1953 Vincente Minnelli film *Story of Three Loves*.

The most recent of many performances here since 1934 was 2003 February 20-22 at the Meyerhoff by pianist Dmitri Alexeev with our own esteemed and precious Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Yuri Temirkanov conducting. One of the most durably appealing renditions of the Rachmaninov *Rhapsody* was recorded (1956, with the Cleveland Orchestra & Szell) by Baltimore's musical doyen: Leon Fleisher of our city's internationally respected Peabody Conservatory. (This famous recording remains one of the best sellers of the work, even a virtual half-century after release.) But his very 1st recording of the *Rhapsody* was 1954 with Massimo Freccia and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra.