

## ALEXANDER GRECHANINOV

Dr David C F Wright

Alexander Tikhonovich Grechaninov was born in Moscow on 23 October 1864. At that time, Anton Rubinstein was 35, Borodin was 31, Balakirev was 27, Mussorgsky 25, Tchaikovsky 24 and Rimsky Korsakov 20

Alexander's father was a small business man having a shop and expected his son to follow in this trade. His parents were only semi-literate.

By the age of ten, Alexander was a good singer in a Moscow High School. It is said that he did not see a piano until he was fourteen years old but, seven years later, he enrolled in the Moscow Conservatory without telling his father who was opposed to musical study.

His main teachers were Sergei Taneyev and Anton Arensky. After an alleged dispute with Arensky who, apparently, said that Grechaninov was useless, Grechaninov moved to St Petersburg Conservatory and studied composition with Rimsky-Korsakov who acknowledged his talent and provided him with financial help. They remained friends until Rimsky's death in 1908. Alexander had no support from his family. In this city, he joined the Belyayev group at his quartet evenings. Belyayev was a keen amateur musician who played the viola and had a publishing concern. Rimsky-Korsakov, Glazunov, Borodin and Liadov were also regular visitors and, together, these four composed a composite string quartet.

Grechaninov married in 1891.

One of his earliest works was his String Quartet no. 1 of 1893 which won a coveted Balyayev prize. It was written at the same time as his Symphony no. 1 which Rimsky Korsakov premiered.

The following year, 1894, a Concert Overture in D also won a prize. In 1895, he composed a Cello Concerto, Op 8, set in one movement and beautifully written for the instrument and vastly superior to many better known concertos for the instrument although the Dvorak B minor still remains the greatest!

Extreme poverty caused him to return to Moscow in 1896 and he composed opera, music for the theatre and music for the Russian Orthodox Church. His vocal and instrumental works were very successful and, for a time, he was the most popular composer in Russia. He was so respected that Tsar Nicholas II awarded him an annual pension. By this time Grechaninov had composed two symphonies (1874 and 1908).

He was deeply religious man but his views were liberal which led to his separation from his wife in 1911. He met a Russian painter and they lived together.

His first opera Dobrynya Nikitich of 1896-1901 was written for Chaliapin. It was premiered at the Bolshoi on 27 October 1903. His second opera, Beatrice, or Sister Beatrice, closed after a full performances as it was considered blasphemous. He had already angered the public by writing a Mass for chorus and orchestra whereas it was an accepted tradition that a Mass was only accompanied by an organ. He was to compose about 44 orthodox liturgies and masses.

His Piano Trio no. 1 dates from 1906 the year after the beginnings of unrest in Russia and the Bloody



Sunday disaster which led Grechaninov to start collecting funds for the stricken families of the violence. This work may show signs of Tchaikovsky's A minor Trio and the work is dedicated to Taneyev.

The work is restless and may not always be successful in the matter of continuity but it contains some beautiful music with a very satisfying conclusion.

There is a second piano trio composed in 1931 in California on a visit to the USA. It is a happy work but, like the first, the sudden changes of tempo, may not always work.

There are five symphonies, although some sources say six. The sketches for the Sixth are in a New York Library.

The Symphony no. 1 in B minor Op 6 is structurally sound and very Russian although it did not find approval with all Russians since it was 'lacking in nationalism'.

The Symphony no. 2 in A Op 27 has sometimes been called the Pastorale and was completed in 1909. The orchestra is handled skilfully and the work abounds in melody.

The Symphony no. 3 is a masterpiece and contains some of the most beautiful music ever written. It was the last of his symphonies to be premiered in Russia.. in Kiev in 1923. It apparently the composer's favourite and the comment that it has French connection baffles me! It is clearly Russian. The orchestration is flawed and the poignant opening flute solo is profoundly beautiful. The harmonies are rich and there is a real emotional content but the piece is never mawkish. The second movement in C sharp minor is a real scherzo and the slow movement is serene. The finale is joy, unbridled joy. Here is music that communicates, has the feel good factor and is as good as any tonal symphony can be. A real gem!

The Symphony no. 4 was completed in St-Jean-de-Luz near Spain's border with France where Grechaninov spent the summer of 1927. It is clearly Russian and, like its predecessor, certainly not French! The work was shown to Koussevitsky who, apparently, was only prepared to perform one movement. When the composer settled in New York, the work was presented to Barbirolli who premiered it with the New York Philharmonic on 9 April 1942. It was always a risk to give a new work to such an erratic conductor, but the second performance which took place in Moscow in 1944 was a great success!

The Symphony no. 5 was premiered at a Philadelphia Youth Concert in 1946.

There is a lot of prejudice by so-called music-lovers about religious music, particularly Christian music. The world is full of hatred for the Christian faith and the music that represents it. But to take two examples of Grechaninov's Christian music, consider the Cantata: Praise the Lord of 1914, a setting of Psalm 150. Here the composer answers his critics by writing another 'religious' work with an orchestra part! The music is glorious and sumptuous; it is joyful and simply splendid! Only a fool would say otherwise.

The Missa Festiva is a setting of the six part traditional mass scored for mixed chorus and organ. It may not have the power of the cantata but is impressive nonetheless. Following its success, the composer wrote his Missa oecumenica which title speaks for itself in which he wishes to combine the music of different churches. He was very interested in ecumenicalism.

In 1925 he moved to Paris, after a brief stay in London, where he stayed until 1939 when he moved to the USA which country had already performed some of his music with success and a country that he had visited on a few earlier occasions. In 1946 he became an American citizen.

He wrote two piano sonatas in G minor, Op 129 and G major, Op 174, respectively. They are not 'big' works but very attractive ones. He wrote a lot of music for young people, music which could be called educational music, but it does not sound educational since the pieces are very well written.

The Paris years included a Violin Concerto Op 132 of 1932 and a Concerto for flute, harp and strings of 1938. The American years saw two major masses, the Missa Sancti Spiritus Op 169 of 1940 and Et Terra Pax Op 166 of 1942. At the age of eighty he wrote his third opera The Marriage after a text by Gogol.

He wrote his autobiography, My Life, in 1952.

He died in New York on 3 January 1956.

One wonders why he is not better known. Was he overshadowed by Rachmaninov? The best of Grechaninov's music is as good as Rachmaninov.

And that is not a sleight on Rachmaninov. Among other things, Rachmaninov was the greatest melodist of all time with long glorious melodies, superb orchestration and his piano music is often quite superb. Consider his preludes and how vastly better they are than those of Chopin and Debussy. Contrary to public opinion Rachmaninov was not a melancholic but loved life and was full of fun... but he missed his beloved Russia.

The current mini-revival in Grechaninov is most welcome.

*Score of Grandfather's Book op. 119*

---

COPYRIGHT David C F Wright 2009 – This article or any part of it, however small, must not be copied, quoted, reproduced, downloaded or altered in any way whatsoever nor stored in any retrieval system. Failure to comply is in breach of International Copyright Law and will render any offender liable to action at law.