

**SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
A JACOBS MASTERWORKS CONCERT
A “BEYOND THE SCORE® PRESENTATION:
RACHMANINOFF: *THE ISLE OF THE DEAD*, Op. 29 Rite of Passage?
Sameer Patel, conductor**

February 9, 2018

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF *The Isle of the Dead*, Op. 29

**Beyond the Score® is a production of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra
Gerard McBurney, *Creative Director* for Beyond the Score®**

***The Isle of the Dead*, Op. 29**
SERGEI RACHMANINOFF
Born April 1, 1873, Oleg
Died March 28 1943, Beverly Hills

In 1880 the Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin painted the first of what would be a series of one of the spookiest, most evocative images ever committed to canvas. Over the next few years he would produce four variations of that painting, which would eventually come to be known as *Die Toteninsel*: “The Isle of the Dead.” All versions of the painting show essentially the same thing. Against a dark and threatening sky, a small island reflects the late afternoon sun, which illuminates its rock cliffs and towering cypresses, a tree identified with cemeteries and with death. In the foreground a small boat approaches the island. A dark-clad oarsman sits in the stern, and in front of him a figure shrouded in pure white stands slightly hunched over a long white box garlanded (in some versions of the painting) with red flowers. All who see the painting are quick to interpret what it “means.” Some have seen it as a depiction of Charon bearing the dead across the River Styx, but Böcklin refused to offer an explanation of his work. He is reported to have told a friend that “it must produce such an effect of stillness that anyone would be frightened to hear a knock on the door,” And so he intentionally left it mysterious (even the name *Die Toteninsel* was supplied by someone else). But no one can see that painting without an immediate visceral response, and over a century later it continues to haunt all who see it.

Among those haunted was Serge Rachmaninoff, who composed his tone poem *The Isle of the Dead* in 1909, eight years after Böcklin's death. One of the most effective things about Böcklin's painting is his eerie combination of colors (gray, gold, black, dark green, deep blue), but the curious thing is that Rachmaninoff first encountered the image in Paris in Böcklin's black and white sketch for the painting, and the composer much preferred that to the color version, which he came to know only later. He said: "I was not much moved by the color of the painting. If I had seen the original first, I might not have composed my *Isle of the Dead*. I like the picture best in black and white."

In any case, Rachmaninoff caught the mood of Böcklin's painting perfectly. *The Isle of the Dead* has one of the most somber openings in all of music. It begins quietly and slowly, with the 5/8 meter catching perfectly the sound of softly-lapping water as the oarsman directs the boat toward the forbidding island. A lonely horn solo sets the bleak mood, and this figure is quickly taken up solo oboe and then trumpet. Pay particular attention to that horn solo: embedded within it is the shape of the ancient *Dies Irae* plainchant, a theme that virtually obsessed Rachmaninoff (and Berlioz and Liszt before him). The music builds to a great brass chorale on this shape, and soon a dancing violin melody arcs high above. This has been called the "life theme," a counterbalance to the dark opening, though one should not interpret this music too literally – it remains a mood-piece throughout. *The Isle of the Dead* builds to a huge climax on great chords spit out by brass and timpani. In the aftermath of that violence, tremolo strings gloomily intone the *Dies Irae* motif, the music winds down on a quiet wind chorale, and on the rocking 5/8 meter from the very beginning *The Isle of the Dead* fades into mysterious silence.

-Program note by Eric Bromberger

PERFORMANCE HISTORY by Dr. Melvin G. Goldzband, San Diego Symphony Archivist

Yoav Talmi conducted the first San Diego Symphony Orchestra performances of the Rachmaninoff tone-painting of Boecklin's haunting *The Isle of the Dead*, during the 1992-93 season. Talmi and the San Diego Symphony subsequently recorded the piece, along with several shorter Rachmaninoff works, for Intersound Recordings, in the then-new, digital-surround sound format. Johannes Debus led the work on its only other performance during these concerts on the occasion of his SDSO debut in the 2015-16 season.