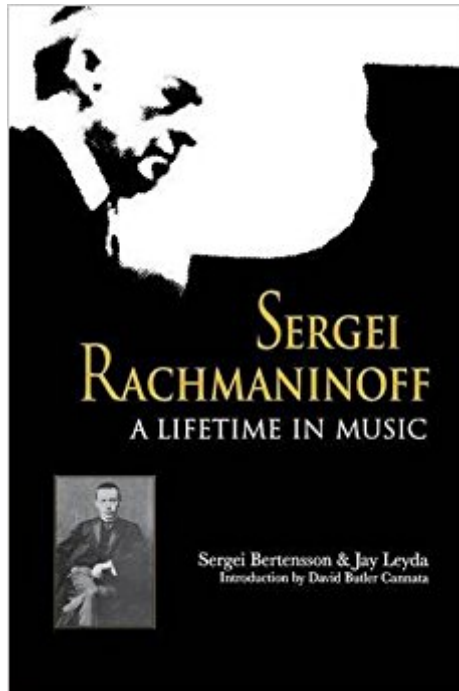




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# **Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime In Music (Russian Music Studies)**



## Synopsis

Sergei Rachmaninoff A Lifetime in Music Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, with the assistance of Sophia Satina With a new introduction by David Butler Cannata An indispensable and captivating document, now back in print! Throughout his career as composer, conductor, and pianist, Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943) was an intensely private individual. When Bertensson and Leyda's 1956 biography appeared, it lifted the veil of secrecy from several areas of Rachmaninoff's life, especially concerning the genesis of his compositions and how their critical reception affected him. The authors consulted a number of people who knew Rachmaninoff, who worked with him, and who corresponded with him. Even with the availability of such sources and full access to the Rachmaninoff Archive at the Library of Congress, Bertensson, Leyda, and were tireless in their pursuit of privately held documents, particularly correspondence. The wonderfully engaging product of their labors masterfully incorporates primary materials into the narrative. Almost half a century after it first appeared, this volume remains essential reading. Sergei Bertensson, who knew Rachmaninoff, published other works on music and film, often with a documentary emphasis. Jay Leyda wrote extensively on Russian music and film, as well as on American literature. David Butler Cannata is Professor of Music at Boyer College of Music, Temple University. Sophia Satina was Rachmaninoff's sister-in-law and cousin. Russian Music Studies Malcolm Hamrick Brown, founding editor

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## Customer Reviews

Sergei Bertensson, who knew Rachmaninoff, published works on music and film, often with a documentary emphasis. Jay Leyda wrote extensively on Russian Music and film, as well as on American literature. David Butler Cannata is Professor of Music History at Esther Boyer College of Music, Temple University.

Just started to read it, extremely interesting and informative. I enjoy in very much.

It's a terrific and complete volume of Rachmanoff's life!

Got it for my pianist friend and he loves it.

A Lifetime in Music is a very complete and thorough biography of Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninoff. It is written in a chronological order and offers many excerpts from his letters to his friends and colleagues, giving insight in his state of mind, his successes and his failures. Once you plunge in, it is hard to put the book away again. Rachmaninoff comes across as a very sympathetic man, a very interesting composer, an exceptionally good pianist and conductor, as well as a fine person (husband and father). Especially for those who like to play his music this book can offer an extra dimension. I loved it!

Unfortunately, this book is pretty boring - it's been a slow slog - only half way through. Barely touches on his music and talent, and mostly uses letters, which gives a sense of his personality, but really doesn't describe him or his talent. Such a great composer deserved a better bio.

This 1956 book is a 2001 reissue and might qualify as the seminal book to appreciate the life of Sergei Rachmaninoff. It comprises some commentary by Bertensson and Leyda (they act as interlocutors of a sort), but, more importantly, it is a series of lengthy excerpts from letters by Rachmaninoff, family, friends, music critics and newspapers; carefully arranged with commentary by time and place to give an in depth and candid overview of the life of this composer, pianist and conductor. While the authors' gentle and admiring sensitivity to the composer enhance the story, their touch is neither intrusive nor annoying. Criticism comes from various music critics identified by name, date of the performance and publication. The appendix is a complete and valued listing of Rachmaninoff's work and records at the time of publishing. A learned introduction is provided by a

professor from Temple University. The role of music critic during his time had more influence than it does in today's world. In 1919, after a performance, a typically snotty Boston critic challenged Rachmaninoff whether real genius was compatible with popularity. The shy, affable Rachmaninoff responded "Yes, I believe it is possible to be very serious, to have something to say, and at the same time to be popular. I believe that. Others do not. They think - what you think." A century after his riposte, there is hardly - and hardly has been - a season for any symphony which does not include the Rhapsody, the Concertos and the Symphonies. His Second and Third Concertos have been fertile soil for movie themes since the 1920s; in "Brief Encounter," his Second Concerto is as much a star as Trevor Howard. The First Movement of the Third Concerto was snapped up by Philip Glass in his theme music for "The Hours." The list goes on and on. As a pianist, his commitment to performing was passionate throughout his life continuing up until just before his death in 1943. In 1942 alone, he gave 41 performances. His fees for these late-in-life performances were for the relief of the Russian people during the German invasion. Rachmaninoff was an impresario pianist, familiar with and expert in the playing his compositions and the works of Beethoven, Liszt and Chopin. One of Saint Saens piano concertos was so complex and difficult that Saint Saens asked Rachmaninoff to premiere the work rather than Saint Saens himself. The trajectory of his life astonishes; born and trained in Russia, escaping his beloved country one month after the October 1917 Revolution, escaping the impending war in Europe in 1939, to living in the New York and Los Angeles at the end of his death. Tchaikovsky was his mentor; Tolstoy, one who counseled him early in his life; Chaliapin, Rimsky Korsakov and Horwitz, close friends; Koussevitzky, his agent and intermediary in the United States and Europe; and Ormandy, the most trusted conductor of his favorite symphonies. What is especially enjoyable is reading the letters and the comments of many of these notables on their influence and involvement in Rachmaninoff extraordinary career and life.

This book is supposed to be a biography of Rachmaninoff written by Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda. In fact, it is neither. This book is actually a collection of excerpts from letters, mostly but not only Rachmaninoff's own, occasionally interspersed with authorial comments which chiefly show that the authors are very indifferent writers indeed. Many of the letters are haphazardly selected and quoted too extensively, including many insignificant details that should have been omitted. The letters are meticulously documented, but it is seldom that their content is examined critically by the authors. For example, in one early letter Rachmaninoff mentions, with great determination, that he was going to get married but we never learn anything more about that; the numerous mental states he refers to are almost always left hanging in the air. Musical or biographical analyses of

Rachmaninoff's works are even rarer and, when present, painfully pedestrian; the same goes for his activities as a pianist and a composer. The ill-fated First Symphony, for instance, is subject to only a few lines of psychological nonsense about its supposedly programmatic character. Although the book is organised in a chronological way, the continuity of the narrative (if that is the word) is often disrupted, and even the current year printed in the upper part of every page doesn't help the matter. Rachmaninoff's friends, family and ancestors are all shadowy figures that never come to life. In short, it is beyond me how other readers could find the book absorbing. For my part, it was a chore of colossal dullness. On the positive side, the book is a good starting point for those seriously interested in Rachmaninoff's life and personality. In addition to the basic events in his life, clumsily related in between, the numerous excerpts from letters present a vivid picture of Rachmaninoff's mind and its development through the years, even if one is left to draw all conclusions alone. The young Rachmaninoff emerges as a compelling mixture of painful shyness and a most remarkable for his age self-assurance. He often appears selfish and petty, but it is not difficult to see that behind the callous façade there was an extremely sensitive and high-strung man whose greatest longing was for human affection. It might come as a surprise to some that Rachmaninoff also had a sense of humour, quite developed in his teens, though later in his life it became more incisive and acerbic. It cannot be denied that the book is revealing about Rachmaninoff's character, including some of his relationship with other great men such as Tchaikovsky, Chekhov or Chaliapin. I only wish the authors had taken the trouble to explore in depth the wealth of insights from Rachmaninoff's letters and to try to put his personality in the context of his life and works. Alas, they chose the laziest possible way: one quote after another, minimum comment of little importance. The book is illustrated with few photographs of indifferent quality. The new edition (2000) comes with an interesting, if a little too long, introduction by David Butler Cannata in which he explores in great detail the history of the volume, first published in 1956 as the first full-scale biography, at least an attempt for such, of Rachmaninoff in English. Somewhat ridiculously, the discography in the end of the book does not seem to have been updated at all since 1956. To say that it is dated is a monumental understatement; why it should have been reprinted here at all I have not the least idea. Pretty much the same is true for the list of Rachmaninoff's own recordings. The list of the works he composed is at least of some importance if one wants to know what and when Rachmaninoff composed, whom he dedicated it or when it was published. In their prefatory note to the completely obsolete discography the authors flatly, and stupidly, declare that they consider Rachmaninoff's recordings of his own works as authoritative. This is precisely what this attempt for a biography is not. At best, it is a basic introduction to Rachmaninoff's life and personality, occasionally insightful

but often excruciatingly dull. The best that can be said about this book is that it is well, though awkwardly, documented and probably very reliable in terms of quoted material. Apart from some perceptive touches as regards to Rachmaninoff's mystical mentality, it tells next to nothing about his works and significance as a composer, his careers as a pianist and conductor, or his recording legacy. Since 1956 a number of studies on all these subjects have appeared, and it is safe to say that the comprehensive ones by [Max Harrison](#) and [Barrie Martyn](#) completely supersede the semi-amateurish attempt of Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda.

I am halfway through book and find it very interesting, captivating, and extremely well done. Not tedious and quite the opposite, I find it difficult stop or pause in reading. I am responding to the negative reviewer who said he was looking for a book on Rachmaninoff's music. My reply to that is there are many sources and references on Rachmaninoff's music but this book, unlike any other, is about the life of Rachmaninoff. Understanding the musical and technical aspects of Rachmaninoff's work is interesting enough but to understand his music one must understand Rachmaninoff - the man and his life.

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