

# Whippoorwill E-Comment

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## A Recital by Rachmaninoff

By Kay Willis

I WONDER if any one also still remembers that night of the fall of 1932 when Sergei Rachmaninoff had come to Madison, Wisconsin, to play a piano program for the University? I was an 18 year old freshman from Boscobel with years of piano lessons to whom this made the University seem even greater than all my aunts and uncles had found it. One of my new friends



went with me to the program, and I went with her to see President Hoover when he rode through Madison in his campaign for a second term.

The new Student Union had no place deemed suitable for the large attendance expected at a performance of so famous a composer and pianist as Rachmaninoff. So it was held in the Agricultural Auditorium suitable only in size. I remember how countrified the

setting seemed when the tall, imposing, properly dressed Rachmaninoff walked across the improvised stage to the beautiful grand piano. He had no trace of a smile which I learned later was usual for him. We were sitting up in the bleachers and looked down at the many empty seats as the marvelous music began. At intermission we moved down close to the platform in two of the empty seats for the rest of the program.

When Rachmaninoff came back for an encore and announced it was, as I later learned, the Prelude in C# Minor we found ourselves in the midst of a tremendous applause. A woman's calm but clearly-heard voice was saying, "Oh, he hates always having to play that." To see and hear him play with his long fingers and big hands something he had composed was unforgettable.



A few days ago (December, 2006) the Illinois Symphony Orchestra and Ilya Itin, born and raised in Russia, played Rachmaninoff's Concerto No. 3 for Piano and Orchestra in D Minor. I went to the concert with two friends one of whom, like my late husband, had been a Professor in the biology department of Illinois State University. His other had been one of his graduate students and also helped in one of my husband's labs. She is now a good friend of a present faculty member in the music school at Illinois

State who also is a member of the Illinois Symphony Orchestra. I had told my two friends about that night in 1932.

Now I know someone in the Orchestra knew, but I was completely surprised when at the end of the Concert Commenta before the concert one of the officers announced I had seen and heard Rachmaninoff play, while my retired professor friends announced I was 92 years old. Then the officer said they wanted me to meet someone and took me back stage. There we went to Ilya Itin's dressing room where he came out to meet me. I was surprised they would ask him to see me so soon before he was to play that difficult music, but he was very pleasant and asked what Rachmaninoff had played. I explained where he played, how there was no symphony orchestra for a concerto, so it was a series of things I couldn't remember. But I did remember the applause when he announced his encore. That Mr. Itin understood because it had even been written about. This had taken a little time, but everyone was comfortable when I said this was a pleasure for me and made it evident I was ready to leave. Again I was surprised when I found there was more to come.

Now the general business, non-musical manager took me to a loge saying they wanted something special for me and my friends who someone else brought in. The orchestra was already tuning and soon the conductor and pianist were beginning their parts in that brilliant performance. After the rest of the program was over the manager saw that I had a good chance to meet the conductor, Karen Deal, and tell her how marvelously the orchestra supported the pianist. Mr. Itin had left after he finished playing, but I will never forget the look of happiness and

relief on their smiling faces as they looked at each other after having played.



Kay Willis is the widow of my late friend and colleague Ed Willis, who was a long time professor of entomology at Illinois State University in Bloomington, Illinois. Bob Weigel introduced him to printing and he and Kay established a private press built around a massive 8x12 inch Craftsman hand press. Ed mastered the craft and printed two books, one an autobiography, and the other a history of Kay's family amounting to nearly 300 pages. After hand setting 12 point Garamont type and printing the sheets one at a time, Ed and Kay learned the traditional methods of bookbinding, and bound the editions themselves. I own copies of both books and treasure them, sterling examples of the highest standards of printing.

Kay is a remarkable lady who has extraordinary interests in the arts and sciences. She is a concert pianist who, at the age of 92, is still learning new music. It is always a treat to visit her when I can get to Bloomington to visit Bob Weigel. We exchange Christmas newsletters and hers are delightful – revealing a mind that is alive and not atrophied as I often find in a great many younger people. If I am privileged to live as long as Kay, I'd like to be like her.

I consider Rachmaninoff to be the second greatest Russian composer, after Tchaikovsky. He and Mendelssohn wrote more notes per square inch than most all other composers.

This E-journal is the work of J. Hill Hamon, a retired Appalachian American (i.e. *redneck*) from Frankfort, Kentucky, a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Amateur Journalist and long time member of the AAPA..