The Psychology of Creativity: Distinction Between Talent and Genius

By Emanuel Garcia

Excerpt of a Lecture presented at the College of Physicians of Philadelphia on November 20, 2003 as part of the Salon Series of the Section on Medicine and the Arts. The College of Physicians was founded in 1787 as an educational and scholarly institution that examines and communicates the relationships between medicine and society. The section on Medicine and the Arts was established in 1994 to study and promote the relationship between healing and creative arts.

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On March 15, 1897, in the Great Hall of the Nobility in St. Petersburg – the Ides of March no less – something rather memorable occurred which had ramifications for the history of Western music. That evening, Rachmaninoff's First Symphony, the Symphony in D minor, was given its première. The conductor, Alexander Glazunov, a composer of some note himself, was on the podium and he was by all accounts inept, inattentive and probably inebriated that evening. So it does not come as a surprise that this Symphony may have fallen on flat ears. But what does come as a great surprise is that Rachmaninoff himself sat on the staircase outside of the audience's seating listening to the chords and discords of his Symphony. He stopped up his ears, and literally fled into the night, riding the trams of St. Petersburg as once he had done as a young child.

This I submit is an extraordinary reaction. He had every reason to feel justified that the conductor's ineptitude was contributing to a fiasco, and he should have been angry. Instead Rachmaninoff entered what amounted to a three-year period of emotional torpor, a period when he composed absolutely nothing, and a period that ended only with the help of the hypnotherapist, Nikolai Dahl, who by dint of very reassuring suggestions to Rachmaninoff, and, I'm sure, some discussion of high culture since Dahl himself was a man of music and learning and it was only after this treatment that Rachmaninoff was able to compose again.

Now when I first learned of this incident I was really quite intrigued. In the past I had done some investigation of the treatment of Bruno Walter, who suffered a paralysis of his conducting arm, and he sought the help of Sigmund Freud, and I'd also looked into the four-hour walk which Gustav Mahler took with Sigmund Freud in Leyden that had such an effect on him. And I think Mahler at that time was near-suicidal and Freud in

some ways really saved his life – although Mahler did not compose after that meeting, and I've explored that in another paper.

I will however make one point – Professor and Conductor, Jonathan Sternberg, who's here in the audience, set me on this mad pursuit about psychopathology and musicians. Over a decade ago, he called me and asked me to look into Mahler's meeting with Freud, and I said, "Well, Jon, there's so little documentation, there's really nothing more I can say about it. Theodor Reik wrote a book about it, I really can't add anything more. But Jonathan persisted and owing to his persistence I actually stumbled across something that had been overlooked and which cast an entirely new perspective on that meeting with Freud. So Jonathan, thank you.

Fortunately for us Rachmaninoff dictated his reminiscences, or memoirs, to Oskar von Riesemann. Again, I thought, here is a perfect forum for us to apply our psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic acumen and to discern, and to try to discover something based solely on a limited text, a text given to us, kind of like manna from heaven, from a great talent. So immediately I decided, in order to pursue this topic appropriately, I would eliminate as much prejudice as possible on my part.

Of course I had listened to Rachmaninoff. I had known many of his works, but I had never heard the First Symphony. I decided I would not listen to anything until I was finished perusing the memoirs and had come to my own conclusions, and I would not look into any of the secondary literature, for a particular reason. First of all, the secondary literature is considerable and I thought that it would influence me in too many directions as I examined the text of the memoirs. I wanted to come to my own conclusions, very similarly to the way in which I approach my own patients who come to me for assistance. I have to focus on them and decide for myself the trends and the psychological conflicts that are lying therein.

Based on my examination of the memoirs I concluded that I had suspicions about several things. I should say more precisely, I thought that the First Symphony was probably a work of originality, and daring, and possibly incipient genius, that caused Rachmaninoff to recoil, principally because it may have stimulated his unconscious ambivalence to his great mentor Tchaikovsky. I suspected the interplay of some love affair, something in this whole episode, but there was no evidence in the memoirs for that so I couldn't really conclude anything firmly. I also sensed – there was a pervasive tone of sadness, of opportunity missed that extended throughout the memoirs, and this was another of the conclusions. Based on these ideas, which I formulated into something of a coherent story for myself, I set about checking them against the secondary sources. Of course, I began to listen to his works.

As it turns out in my experience the First Symphony struck me as indeed an original, daring, brutally powerful piece of music, unlike anything that I had ever heard of Rachmaninoff. I should also mention I had concluded that the compositions after the First Symphony tended to be conservative; though beautiful and sumptuous and wonderful in their own right, they did not carry on the boldness established by the First Symphony. I think this has been borne out by all the musicological references that I have read. The story got a little more complex – there was indeed a love affair, and without going into too many details – Rachmaninoff had dedicated the Symphony to Anna L. (I'm not sure how to pronounce her last name). So I'll call her Anna L. for our purposes.

She was the gypsy wife of a cellist colleague to whom, a few years earlier, he had dedicated the song "Oh no, I beg you, do not forsake me!" I suspected that the affair was probably unconsummated, although there is no documentation to support this assertion. In any case, the story was rich and extends even back further to an opera that

Rachmaninoff wrote in a furious burst of creativity at the end of his stay at the Moscow Conservatoire, the opera *Aleko,* which ties in beautifully to the psychology that's expressed in this story of his emotional crisis.

The other person who emerged for me with great force in the memoirs was none other than Alexander Scriabin. Now I consider myself to be a somewhat knowledgeable and interested listener of classical music for much of my life, and I am embarrassed to tell you that at the time when I finished my research on Rachmaninoff, I could not recall having heard a single composition written by Scriabin. I missed the great performances by Muti in the 80s in Philadelphia. I probably heard Horowitz do something in a live concert but I have no memory of it, but I was intrigued at the mention of Scriabin in the memoirs.

I want to spend a few minutes talking about the psychology of creativity, of genius, a little about Freud, and my ideas about the general nature of genius, after which I will discuss in more detail the lives of Rachmaninoff and Scriabin and play some of their music.

Freud very humbly declared that when faced with the problem of the creative artist, psychoanalysis must lay down its arms. Nonetheless, he did take up arms against the sea of complexities in creativity, and he wrote papers on Goethe, Leonardo, Dostoyevsky, Jensen's *Gradiva*, so he didn't exactly follow his own advice. He is often castigated for referring to the female psyche as a dark continent. And yet what his detractors never realized, in making that statement what I think Freud was really talking about was the very issue of creativity, for which human birth is the prototype. Indeed *this* is the dark continent of our psychology. We know virtually nothing about the crowning achievement of humankind, the spark that allows people to create.

I think it is our duty not to shirk our responsibilities. My dear friend, the deceased K. R. Eissler, was probably the most significant contributor to our field in the area of talent and genius, in many works, on Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* Goethe, Leonardo, and Freud himself. He is possibly the only intelligent commentator on the psychology of Freud's genius.

Let me regale you with some of my own ideas about genius.

First, let us examine the question of psychopathology. While it is common for people to have the idea that all geniuses are mad, it has become more fashionable of late for members of the psychiatric or psychoanalytic community to discuss and retrospectively diagnose great minds of the past, and to talk about so-and-so having bipolar or schizoaffective disorder, or this, that and the other. I think that this is a really superficial and a very damaging way of viewing things. As we discuss Scriabin's *Mysterium,* I'll illustrate the approach that I take in this regard.

Second, let us look at the role of fate, luck, circumstance, chance. There is another popular notion that the genius overcomes all obstacles: the genius is triumphant by sheer will power. Well I think that's absolutely ridiculous, and a lot of luck goes into the evolution of genius. One example I should like to suggest is from one of Mark Twain's famous stories, *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven.* In this particular story, a citizen of the earth has ascended to heaven and is treated to a procession of the greatest writers in the history of the earth. I think he's seated next to the Creator for this one, and he sees this long procession, with Shakespeare on the left holding a banner, Dante on the right, Virgil behind him, Homer right and to the rear, and this small unknown man at the head of the procession. He asks the Lord, "who is this person?" The Lord answers, "Well, that's Billings of Tennessee." The citizen asks, "who is Billings of Tennessee?" The Lord says, "Well, he was the greatest poet, novelist and dramatist in the entire history of the earth... He was never published, however." So genius depends also on luck and fate!

Third, let us investigate the issue of qualitative faculty versus quantitative in discussing genius versus talent. James Gleick in his works on chaos, Richard Feynman, and Newton discusses this problem himself. There are some who view the genius as a person who is just a thousand times more talented than a talent, you know, just more of the same faculty. And others who hold that there is something a little more qualitatively at stake here. I tend towards the latter viewpoint with respect to the issue of genius.

Other matters I want to touch upon have to do with my own categorization of genius. I like to separate geniuses basically, and maybe simplistically, into three different types: the Scientific, the Political/Criminal, and the Artistic. The Scientific genius tends to be a master at the organization of facts, of observations into new paradigms. The Political/Criminal geniuses include Caesar, Alexander, Napoleon, who are masters of the manipulation of people, at the reorganization of territory. The Artistic genius, which I think is the most pure, the most beautiful, the most concerned with the act of love is much more difficult to define. The Scientific genius – let's take Darwin for example, or Newton – when they formulated their theories, these theories gave them immense explanatory power. The Political genius – after he or she does something – can see the fruits of his or her labors very readily. What does the Artistic genius have that's comparable? Well, he or she doesn't know whether their works will be read or listened to. If they truly are good, they will be listened to, seen or discussed two centuries from now. It is really a very murky terrain, but one worth exploring tonight.

Freud once remarked that genius was not a matter of sheer intellectual endowment, but it was a matter of courage and character. I agree with him there. Darwin is a great example. Darwin strikes me as being someone of really rather ordinary intellect. If you look at his progress in school, he was no bright light. However, he was persistent; he was dogged; he was able to cut through the prejudices of his era to establish something that most people consider perhaps the greatest explanatory scientific theory that we have.

Lastly, we consider the principle of what I would call optimal stimulation. The artistic genius in particular has to assimilate the fundamentals of his art, and exclude too many stimuli from distracting him. A composer can only immerse himself in Bach so long, and at such intensity, if he really wants to set out in novel directions. Generally, I believe that the musical genius will unconsciously arrive at the appropriate degree of optimal stimulation. Mahler conducted for 9 months of the year, and was in touch with the great works of everyone, but in the summer months he isolated himself and was devoted to the task of pure composition. In Mahler's case, I think that the conducting was actually a central part of his composing. Scriabin is criticized at times for his not listening to Mozart or Bach, for his dismissal of Beethoven, but I think this was a necessary attitude he needed to take for himself in order to break the ground he was breaking in any case.

When I finally got around to listening to the music of Scriabin, I was completely enthralled. Like Keats when first reading Chapman's *Homer*, he says, "Then felt I like a watcher of the skies when a new planet swims into his ken." I thought, "Why is Scriabin so virtually unknown here in the West?" In Russia the situation is different. How many of you in the audience have ever heard Scriabin performed in concert?

That's pretty good, actually, that's very atypical. I think he suffered neglect by Fate, and hopefully the tide is beginning to change. I know that Edith Finton Rieber, who is the President of the Scriabin Society of America, is here tonight – thank you for coming. She is one of the foremost Scriabin experts in the world, and her Society is doing a great deal to correct the situation regarding this phenomenal composer.

Let me tell you a little bit about Rachmaninoff and Scriabin, and then we're going to listen to their music. We have two musical giants, of tremendous ability, who were born at virtually the same time, and had the same major professors and attended the same conservatory and daily crossed paths. Each, however, pursued different directions.

Rachmaninoff, in his famous comment at the end of the memoirs, says he regrets having chased three hares, that is, having pursued conducting, performing as a pianist and composing. He was a magnificent pianist, and his peer was Josef Hofmann at the time. Scriabin was for the most part purely and simply a composer. Now it's true he played; in those days composers played their own music, and they were both phenomenal, though different pianists, different types of pianists.

Let me just read you two quotes:

> "The searches of a great talent are always interesting. Although personally I cannot consider Rachmaninoff a musical phenomenon of the highest order (for me his personality as a musician, as conductor, and especially as pianist must be placed above his career as composer, in which I acknowledge him as an outstanding talent, no more), nevertheless one senses in him a tremendous inner power, a potentiality that some barrier prevents from emerging fully... His artistic personality contains the promise of something greater than he has yet given us."

Sabanayev's remarks resonated remarkably with my own analysis of Rachmaninoff's memoirs. Rachmaninoff was a man of great passion, but he himself sensed that it was somehow prevented from reaching its fullest expression.

Scriabin's music on the other hand continually evolved. A musicological analysis of Scriabin, conducted by a woman whose name is Dernova (if that's the right pronunciation) – in any case, obviously it's outside my scope, the ability to read her work, but Bowers, Scriabin's great biographer, puts great stock in her discovery, which is nothing less than decoding the chordal structure of Scriabin's works, and she writes:

> "Scriabin's harmonic system is a unique phenomenon in the history of Russian music at the beginning of the 20th century ... **In his last opuses almost none of his harmonies is ever repeated."**

I must pause there: that is an absolutely astounding statement to make, and in fact it corresponds to what one hears. This is amazing for this to occur, because we repeat ourselves all the time.

> "Nor does he 'use up' or wear out those harmonies already found in the *Poem of Ecstasy* and *Prometheus* which so perplexed his contemporaries. He continued to disclose even more and newer possibilities contained within the system."

I would add that Scriabin arrived at this system intuitively, unconsciously.

Has anyone heard the *Prometheus* symphony? The last minute of the *Prometheus* to me is one of the most breathtaking moments in all of music!

Let me make a few comments about what I consider to be the preconditions for genius versus talent. First, when we see a doting maternal figure for the male child – in this case – which inculcates a sense of tremendous security and omnipotence in the child. Now a very beautiful anecdote comes to mind about Goethe, who had an adoring mother, who used to read Goethe bedtime stories, and these were serial stories that didn't have an ending. So the young bright Goethe would listen to the story, run to his grandmother and tell her what he thought was going to happen next. The grandmother would tell the mother and the mother would start the next story fulfilling the young child's wishes. Now if this isn't the most amazing technique to inculcate a sense of omnipotence...

This is a situation where I think Scriabin had the advantage over Rachmaninoff because his Aunt Lyubov, for all the so-called suffocating attention she gave him, was so omnipresent, so doting a figure, whereas Rachmaninoff's maternal grandmother, who was really the warm maternal figure in his life, could not compensate for the inattention of his mother. In fact he only mentions his mother twice in his entire correspondence – and he tends to associate her with comments like "everything in its place" and "a time for everything" – a kind of disciplinarian attitude. And he was closer to his father, who was in and out of the picture, and not a terribly strong figure.

The second issue in the life of the evolving genius is the tremendous dedicated support of the mentor, preferably in the field, and whom – a mentor whom the genius has already surpassed. It's interesting: Tchaikovsky was Rachmaninoff's mentor, his strongest supporter, and I have an idea or suspicion that had Tchaikovsky been alive he may have taken Rachmaninoff over that threshold. He would have supported Rachmaninoff's explorations which began with his First Symphony. In fact, when Rachmaninoff as a 16-year-old was composing the four-hand transcription of *The Sleeping Beauty,* Tchaikovsky criticized him, he said, "He's too slavish to the composer's intentions; he should be developing his own ideas to bring this work out." Very interesting comment!

In any case, Scriabin had the support of the director of the Moscow Conservatoire, Vassili Safonov. Safonov, at times a difficult person, outrageously spoiled Scriabin who could do no wrong. Everything Scriabin wrote was the last word in Western music ... he calls Scriabin's improvising "one of highest pleasures of my musical life." He said that Scriabin had already attained the pianist's chief aim, which was "to make the piano not sound like a piano." He said, "Scriabin's a very, very great pianist and a great composer; he's cleverer than Chopin ever was." About Scriabin's First Symphony, Safonov says, "I cannot begin to convey to you my rapture over your symphony; it is a divine creation." Its première, by the way was disastrous, but this didn't deter Scriabin. About the Second Symphony, (which Safonov conducted at the première), he said, "Here is the new Bible."! Now what more could a young struggling aspiring composer ask for than this tremendous support from a great musician? I think again here he has the advantage over Rachmaninoff, to whom chance or fate had delivered an unkind blow.

The other precondition or phenomenon I wanted to mention, is what is the response of the artist to the first truly great crisis of one's life. Typically this involves a love affair, and the first love affair in their life which is always disastrous. My dear friend Kurt Eissler wrote about the effect of an infatuation of Freud's and the effect it had on the entire direction of his career. Freud might have been best known as a novelist today had he not fallen in love with Gisela Fluss in the summer when he was 16. Very interesting! Well, on the occasion of the first great crisis in Rachmaninoff's emotional life, connected with the failure of the First Symphony, which I believe was tied up with feelings of frustrated love ... by the way he dedicated it to Anna L., and the epigraph on the orchestral score was "Vengeance is mine saith the Lord" – the same epigraph used by Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina.* Something was going on of that kind, something that was driving him crazy – the symphony is powerful for its brutal expression ... of vengeance, perhaps. Much more powerful I think than *The Rite of Spring.* When we compare that symphony to Stravinsky's 1906 first symphony, there's no comparison. Rachmaninoff was so far in advance. Yet Rachmaninoff took it out of circulation; he didn't destroy it, but unfortunately he buried it. And this at a time of tremendous social and cultural ferment, at the apogee of a century of Russian artistic evolution. I'm digressing, but think of what Russia produced from 1820 to 1920: Pushkin, Glinka, Tolstoy,

Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, Chekhov, Balakirev, Rimsky-Korsakoff, and Mussorgsky. An amazing century!

Unfortunately, Rachmaninoff's response to this first great crisis was to flee. Scriabin's response to the first great crisis of his life – the loss of the use of his right hand – was to compose. I think here we have some ingredients that may explain the differences in evolution between the great talent and the great genius.

Let me go on to the *Mysterium.* Around 1902, Scriabin conceived the idea of what has now become known to us at the *Mysterium.* I'm not going to delve into the complicated and abstruse mystical metaphysics of it all, except to say that I think it was the grandest project conceived in the history of art. And Scriabin believed that by staging a festival that would incorporate all of the arts of mankind, the entire world would be consumed in a cataclysm and destroyed, only to give birth to a new order based on the ecstasy of love – something along those lines. But at some point he himself came to realize that the *Mysterium* was such a project that humankind needed to be prepared for it, so he wanted to stage what we have come to know as the *Prefatory Action,* or *Acte Préable,* which was very similar to the *Mysterium,* which he was going to set in the Himalayas, incorporate aromas, dance, the audience would be participants, he would be a Promethean hero leading things, and he in fact was planning to go to India at the time just before his unfortunate death at the age of 43, to begin work on this tremendous project.

Well, what can we say about this? Koussevitsky, who was a champion of Scriabin for a while, said something to the effect that he thought all that would happen after a performance of the *Prefatory Act* would be a good dinner. Nonetheless, do we consider this an example of Scriabin's madness, craziness? Looked at from a different perspective I think we see that it serves other functions. When we look at it from the perspective of what the genius' daemon is pushing him into, in order to allow him to conceive, to create in new and breathtaking and boundary-breaking ways, then the *Mysterium* makes a great deal of sense.

First, it helps again to inculcate the sense of omnipotence.

Second, it creates, as geniuses tend to do, a competing reality – a reality that is of course not as grand as the reality of the external world, but which produces the illusion of being a substitute for it. Shakespeare's world, I think comes closest to doing that in the whole history of art, but the *Mysterium* for Scriabin had that function – to create a competing reality.

Third, what better way to develop a unique potent, breathtaking creative voice than with a project that would transcend the very art of which you are a practitioner? I think the *Mysterium* served these and other functions extraordinarily well and infused his ability to create his ever more daring and complex and novel and beautiful works.

I know of no composer whose ratio of masterpieces of compositions is so high. Truly nearly everything he wrote is absolutely brilliant. He's a particularly modern genius, I believe, in the sense that elements of condensation and compression abound. His notation is so charged... I hear one Etude of Scriabin's and I say it's worth an entire symphony of other people. I hope I don't offend the Mahlerians here, but I listened to the Fifth Symphony of Mahler not too long ago, and I had that very thought, of "Oh, my gosh, a Scriabin Etude has said all of this and so much more." Pardon me, Mahler!

I want to talk about several other things before we conclude. I think we tend to underestimate the suffering and torture that is entailed in the act of creating something absolutely new. Now I'm not talking about writing *Cats* or *Phantom of the Opera,* I'm talking about writing serious stuff that attempts to encompass the universe and express

it through musical notation, and this is what Scriabin was on a mission to do and for which we owe him great respect. It's torture, it literally takes a toll, it's essential, and it leads to lots of pain and suffering.

This leads me then to discuss whether pain and suffering have relevance to psychotherapy and to the psychology of the creative arts? I would basically say, that in our work as psychotherapists, not just with creative people but with anyone, unless we nurture the creative faculty, we're really not effectively doing our job. **Unless one creates, one destroys.** I can't say it any more succinctly than that.

I do want to quote myself, from a paper where I said:

> "The strains imposed by the task of discovering a novel expressive language are generally impossible to sustain and can only be overcome by an interlocking complex of fortunate circumstance, personal support and private courage."

Scriabin was an artist-hero, a Promethean hero, as it were, and if there's any doubt about what the *Mysterium* does, basically it gives voice to the innermost desires of *every* artist. *Every* artist in his soul wants to transform the world; every artist is a hero to himself and to all others, and the *Mysterium* basically is a literal expression of these innermost beliefs. If you've read James Joyce, you know what he says about himself and his works. This is what is the secret desire of every artist and it's expressed in this grand concept by Scriabin.

This respect for art and the role of the artist... The famous Russian impresario Diaghilev happened to offend, or say something to Scriabin involving tickets, so Scriabin replies, almost hysterically, "You allow yourself to talk to me this way! You forget art. We are artists. We create it, and you merely flutter and strut about its edges selling it. Without us, who would want to know you? You would be less than nothing on this earth!" He was pretty clear! Diaghilev backed down at that point.

And on the famous tour of the Volga with Koussevitsky, after a politician had been praised in casual conversation, Scriabin says, "Politicians and bureaucrats are not to be praised. Writers, composers, authors and sculptors are the first-ranking men in the universe, first to expound principles and doctrines, and solve world problems. Real progress rests on artists alone. They must not give their place to others of lower aims..."

He is very clear about the Promethean mission of the artist.

In conjunction with Dr. Garcia's lecture pianist Elena Jivaeva played the following pieces:

Rachmaninoff

Op. 3, No.4. Polichinelle. (Five Fantasy Pieces for Piano) (1892)
Op. 23, No. 6. (Ten Preludes for Piano) (1903)

Scriabin

Op. 11, No. 10 (24 Preludes for Piano) (1888-96)
Poème, Op. 32, No. 1 (1903)
Poème-Nocturne, op. 61 (1911-12)

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