
RACHMANINOFF
symphonic dances
études–tableaux
(orch. Respighi)
vocalise
EIJI OUE
MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA
REFERENCE RECORDINGS
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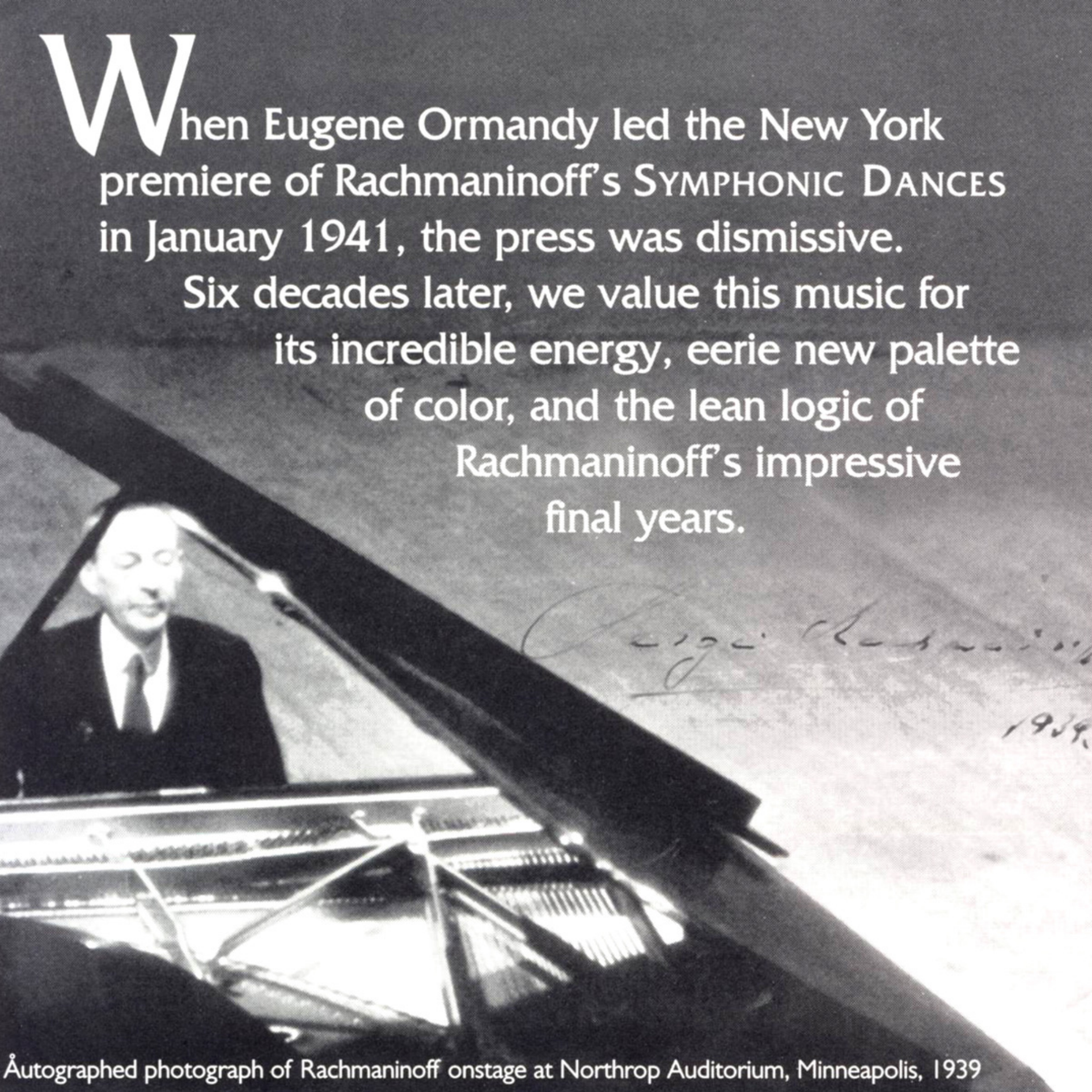
When Eugene Ormandy led the New York premiere of Rachmaninoff's SYMPHONIC DANCES in January 1941, the press was dismissive. Six decades later, we value this music for its incredible energy, eerie new palette of color, and the lean logic of Rachmaninoff's impressive final years.



Autographed photograph of Rachmaninoff onstage at Northrop Auditorium, Minneapolis, 1939

Symphonic Dances, Opus 45

Rachmaninoff spent the summer of 1940 at Orchard Point, a seventeen-acre estate on Long Island that had groves, orchards, and a secluded studio where he could work in peace. There, very near the East and West Egg of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Rachmaninoff set to work on what would be his final complete work, a set of dances for orchestra. By August, he had the score complete in a version for two pianos, and – because he regarded this as a dance score – he consulted with choreographer Mikhail Fokine, a neighbor that summer. Rachmaninoff tentatively titled the piece *Fantastic Dances* and gave its three movements names – NOON, TWILIGHT, and MIDNIGHT – that might suggest a possible scenario. Fokine liked the music when Rachmaninoff played it for him, and they began to look ahead to a ballet production, but Fokine's death shortly thereafter ended any thought of that. Even by the end of the summer, though, Rachmaninoff appears to have rethought the character of this music. By the time he completed the orchestration on October 29, he had changed its name to *Symphonic Dances* and dropped the descriptive movement titles, and when Eugene Ormandy and The Philadelphia Orchestra gave the premiere on January 3, 1941, it was as a purely orchestral composition. Rachmaninoff himself seemed surprised by what he had created, and when friends congratulated him on the energy of this music, he said, "I don't know how it happened – it must have been my last spark." Two years later he was dead.

This score is remarkable for the opulence of its color, and Rachmaninoff seems intent here on finding and exploiting new orchestral sonorities. Some of these are completely new sounds for him (such as his use of an alto saxophone),

but more comes from his refined use of standard instruments, such as the contrasting sound of stopped, open, and muted brass in the second movement or the striking cascades of open-string figures in the last. For all their sumptuous sound, though, the *Symphonic Dances* are more remarkable for Rachmaninoff's subtle compositional method. Rather than relying on the Big Tune, he evolves this music from the most economical of materials – rhythmic fragments, bits of theme, simple patterns – which are then built up into powerful movements that almost overflow with rhythmic energy. Rachmaninoff may have been 67 and in declining strength in 1940, but that summer he wrote with the hand of a master.

The music opens with some of these fragments, just bits of sound from the first violins, and over them the English horn sounds the three-note pattern that will permeate the *Symphonic Dances*, reappearing in endless forms across the span of this score. Rachmaninoff plays it up here into a great climax, which subsides as the opening fragments lead to the central episode, sung at first entirely by woodwinds. This slow interlude – somehow the reedy sound of the alto sax is exactly right for this wistful music – makes its way back to the big gestures of the beginning section, now energized by explosive timpani salvos. In the closing moments, Rachmaninoff rounds matters off with a grand chorale for strings (here finally is the Big Tune), beautifully accompanied by the glistening sound of bells, piano, harp, piccolo, and flutes, and the movement winks into silence on the fragments with which it began.

The opening of the second movement takes us into a completely different sound-world, for Rachmaninoff begins with the icy sound of trumpets and horns, played *forte* but stopped. This movement is marked *Tempo di valse*, the only explicit dance indication in the score. Fokine himself warned Rachmaninoff not to feel

bound to "dance" music (and specifically to waltz music) when writing music for dancing – if the music had vitality and character, Fokine would find a way to make it work as a ballet. Rachmaninoff may call for a waltz tempo here, but he avoids the traditional meter of 3/4, setting the music instead in 6/8 and 9/8, and having the waltz introduced by the unlikely sound of solo English horn. This waltz evolves through several episodes – some soaring, some powerful – before the movement subsides to a sudden, almost breathless close.

The slow introduction to the final movement is enlivened by the strings' interjections of the three-note pattern. Gradually these anneal into the *Allegro vivace*, and off the movement goes, full of rhythmic energy and the sound of ringing bells. A central episode in the tempo of the introduction sings darkly (Rachmaninoff marks it *lamentoso)*; there are some wonderful sounds here, including great eerie string glissandos, and finally the *Allegro vivace* returns to rush the *Symphonic Dances* to the close. Out of this rush, some unexpected features emerge: a quotation from Rachmaninoff's First Symphony (composed nearly fifty years earlier), the liturgical chant "Blessed Be the Lord," and – finally – that old Rachmaninoff obsession, the *Dies irae*. At first this is only hinted at, but gradually it takes shape amid the blazing rush and finally is shouted out in all its glory as this music dances furiously to a close guaranteed to rip the top off a concert hall.

As he finished each of his symphonies, Joseph Haydn would write *Laus Deo* – "Praise God" – at the end of the manuscript. At the end of the manuscript of *Symphonic Dances,* Rachmaninoff – perhaps aware that this would be his last work – wrote (in Russian) the simple phrase: "I thank Thee, Lord."

Vocalise, Op. 34

As a young man, Rachmaninoff counted among his friends the coloratura soprano Antonina Neshdanova, a member of the Moscow Grand Opera. The *Vocalise* was written for her in 1912, as a wordless melody for voice and piano. Serge Koussevitzky approached the composer to make an orchestral transcription (the version heard here), in which the first violins sing the haunting vocal line.

Five Études-Tableaux

(orchestrated by Ottorino Respighi)

Late in 1929, Serge Rachmaninoff received a proposal from Serge Koussevitsky that the conductor's publishing firm – the Edition Russe de Musique – commission Ottorino Respighi to orchestrate several movements drawn from Rachmaninoff's *Études-Tableaux;* Rachmaninoff would be free to choose which ones. The proposal came at a good moment for all concerned. Seven years earlier, Koussevitsky had brought about one of the most successful of all arrangements when he commissioned Ravel to orchestrate Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (and Koussevitsky and the Boston Symphony would make a tremendous recording of that score ten months later, in October 1930); the conductor hoped to achieve a similar success with this project. Rachmaninoff was delighted with the proposal. Respighi's reputation was at this point very high in the United States. He had made his American debut as a conductor with The Philadelphia Orchestra in 1926, and in February 1929 – only a few months before Koussevitsky's proposal to Rachmaninoff – Toscanini had led the

New York Philharmonic in the premiere of *Feste Romane*. Rachmaninoff wrote to Respighi in Italy that the proposed project gave him "great joy, for I am sure that in your masterly hands these Etudes will be made to sound marvelous."

Rachmaninoff's two sets of *Études-Tableaux*, composed in 1911 (Opus 33) and 1917 (Opus 39), are terrifically difficult works for solo piano. That title means "picture-studies," which seems to imply a visual component, but when faced with questions about what this music "pictured," Rachmaninoff had been evasive, saying, "I do not believe in the artist discussing too much of his images. Let them paint for themselves what it most suggests." Now, however, Rachmaninoff was more forthcoming, and in a letter to Respighi he revealed (perhaps!) what this music was "about." That letter is worth quoting at length:

> "Will you permit me, Maître, to give you the secret explanations of their composer? These will certainly make the character of these pieces more comprehensible and help you to find the necessary colors for their orchestration. Here are the programs of these Etudes.
>
> The first Etude in A minor represents the Sea and Seagulls. (This program was suggested by Mme. Rachmaninoff.)
>
> The second Etude in A minor was inspired by the tale of Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf.
>
> The third Etude in E-flat major is a scene at a Fair.
>
> The fourth Etude in D major has a similar character, resembling an oriental march.
>
> The fifth Etude in C minor is a funeral march . . ."

Respighi did a splendid job with the orchestration. He rearranged Rachmaninoff's order but otherwise remained strictly faithful to these five pieces, keeping each in its original key and preserving all the performance markings of Rachmaninoff's piano version. There are many wonderful touches here – the use of three solo violas at one spot in the first movement, the resplendent bells in the third, the gruff growls of the "wolf," and the resounding close of THE FAIR among them – but the orchestrated *Études-Tableaux* have never approached the popularity of Ravel's orchestration of *Pictures*. Perhaps the reason is that while Mussorgsky's *Pictures* were by definition visual, Rachmaninoff's "picture-studies" remain abstract and – despite his "explanations" – do not so readily spring to life when transformed into orchestral color.

THE SEA AND THE SEAGULLS (Opus 39, No. 2) may have suggested its title to Mrs. Rachmaninoff through the murmuring sounds at the opening, broken – in Respighi's orchestration – by lonely violin and woodwind cries above these quiet triplets. Respighi shuffled the order of the remaining movements, placing the brief FAIR (Opus 33, No. 7) second and bringing the FUNERAL MARCH (Opus 39, No. 7) from Rachmaninoff's final position to make it the central movement. For Respighi, Rachmaninoff prepared a more detailed program for this movement, and here we sense that we are hearing the movement's original inspiration: "The initial theme is a march. The other theme represents the singing of a choir. Commencing with the movement in 16ths in C minor and a little further on in E-flat minor, a fine rain is suggested, incessant and hopeless. This movement develops, culminating in C minor – the chimes of a church. The Finale returns to the first theme, a march." LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD AND THE WOLF (Opus 39, No. 6) opposes its opening growl with more high-pitched material, which Respighi assigns to the violins, while the concluding MARCH (Opus 39, No. 9) drives to a thunderous close.

Koussevitsky led the Boston Symphony in the first performance of Respighi's orchestration on November 13, 1931. Rachmaninoff was able to hear this version while on a tour of the Midwest two months later. That tour (which included performances of his Second Piano Concerto with the Minneapolis Symphony under Eugene Ormandy) also took him to Chicago, where Frederick Stock performed the *Études-Tableaux* on a program that featured Rachmaninoff as soloist in his Third Piano Concerto.

—**Eric Bromberger**

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Photograph, Page 2: From the Sam Grodnick Collection of the Minneapolis Public Library

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EIJI OUE became the ninth music director of the Minnesota Orchestra in 1995. Before joining the Minnesota Orchestra, Eiji Oue served as music director of Pennsylvania's Erie Philharmonic from 1991 to 1995. For four years prior to the Erie post, Oue was associate conductor of the Buffalo Philharmonic. He has guest conducted widely throughout the United States, Europe and Japan, including the Philadelphia Orchestra, the National Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra. In 1996 Oue became music director of the Grand Teton Music Festival, and the following year he was named Chief Conductor of Germany's Radio-Philharmonie Hannover of the NDR.

A native of Hiroshima, Japan, Eiji Oue studied at the Toho School of Music, where he began his conducting studies with Hideo Saito, who had been the teacher of Seiji Ozawa. Oue first came to the United States in 1978 when Ozawa invited him to spend the summer studying at the Tanglewood Music Center. He subsequently studied at the New England Conservatory of Music, where he was awarded an artist diploma in conducting. While at Tanglewood, Oue became a protégé of Leonard Bernstein. During the summer of 1990, Oue assisted Bernstein in the creation of the Pacific Music Festival in Sapporo, Japan, serving as resident conductor for the Festival Orchestra.

Eiji Oue has won numerous honors and awards, among them the Koussevitzky Prize at Tanglewood in 1980 and both first prize and the Hans Haring Gold Medal in the 1981 conducting competition at the Salzburg Mozarteum. And some honors are unofficial: the family of Leonard Bernstein presented Oue with the baton and concert jacket from the maestro's last concert.

MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA

The Minnesota Orchestra, founded in 1903 as the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, has long been recognized as one of America's leading symphony orchestras. Eiji Oue carries on the tradition embodied in the ensemble's roster of celebrated music directors: Edo de Waart (1986-95), Sir Neville Marriner (1979-86), Stanislaw Skrowaczewski (1960-79), Antal Doráti (1949-60), Dimitri Mitropoulos (1937-49), Eugene Ormandy (1931-36), Henri Verbrugghen (1923-31) and Emil Oberhoffer (1903-22).

The Minnesota Orchestra's radio history began in 1923 with a national broadcast under guest conductor Bruno Walter and continues today with a broadcast series produced by Minnesota Public Radio for the Public Radio International network and carried on more than 100 stations in the United States as well as on the cable system of WFMT, Chicago's commercial fine arts radio station. Historic recordings of this orchestra, which date back to 1924, include releases for RCA Victor, Columbia, Mercury "Living Presence" and Vox Records. In more recent seasons they have been augmented by discs on the Telarc, EMI/Angel, CBS, Philips and Virgin Classics labels.

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RACHMANINOFF

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2 andante con moto (tempo di valse) 10:29
3 lento assai 14:27

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