



Great Pianists • Rachmaninov

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Sergey RACHMANINOV

Piano Concertos Nos. 2 and 3

Sergey Rachmaninov, Piano
The Philadelphia Orchestra
Leopold Stokowski
Eugene Ormandy

Historical Recordings 1929 • 1939 • 1940

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873 - 1943)

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18

Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, Op. 30

Sergey Vasilyevich Rachmaninov was among those Russian composers who chose exile, rather than remain in Russia after the Revolution of 1917, the consequent civil turmoil and, as it turned out, the years of despotic oppression that followed. He was born at Semyonovo in 1873 into a family of strong military traditions on his mother's side and more remotely on his father's. A tendency to extravagance had depleted his father's fortunes and made it necessary to sell off much of their land, while dissipating his wife's dowry. As a result of this, the childhood of Rachmaninov was largely spent at the one remaining family estate at Oneg, near Novgorod. The reduction in family circumstances had at least one happier result.

When it became necessary to sell this estate and move to St Petersburg, the expense of educating the boy for the Imperial service proved too great. Rachmaninov could make use, instead, of his musical gifts, entering St Petersburg Conservatory at the age of nine with a scholarship. Showing no particular industry as a student and lacking the attention he needed at home, in 1885 Rachmaninov failed all his general subject examinations at the Conservatory and there were threats that his scholarship would be withdrawn. His mother, now separated from her husband and responsible for her son's welfare, arranged, on the advice of the well known pianist Alexander Ziloti, that he should move to Moscow to study with Zverev, one of his own former teachers and known to impose the strictest discipline. In Zverev's house, however uncongenial the rigorous routine, Rachmaninov acquired much of his phenomenal ability as a pianist, while broadening his musical understanding by attending concerts in the city. At the age of fifteen he became a pupil of his cousin Ziloti, a musician who had also studied with Tchaikovsky, Nikolay Rubinstein and, thereafter, with Liszt. Rachmaninov had lessons in harmony and counterpoint with Sergey Taneyev and Arensky, and his growing interest in composition led to a quarrel with Zverev and removal to the house of his relations, the Satins.

In 1891 Rachmaninov completed his piano studies at the Conservatory and the composition of his first piano concerto. The following year he graduated from the composition class with his opera *Aleko* and in the same year composed the notorious *Prelude in C sharp minor*, a piece that was to haunt him by its excessive popularity. His early career brought initial success as a composer, halted by the failure of his first

symphony at its first performance in 1897, when it was conducted badly by Glazunov, apparently drunk at the time, and then reviewed in the cruellest terms by César Cui, who described it as a student attempt to depict in music the seven plagues of Egypt. Rachmaninov busied himself as a conductor, accepting an engagement in this capacity with Mamontov's Moscow Private Russian Opera Company. He was only able to return to composition after a course of treatment with Dr Nikolay Dahl, a believer in the efficacy of hypnotism. The immediate result was the second of his four piano concertos, a work that has proved to be one of the most immediately popular of all he wrote.

The years before the Russian revolution brought continued successful activity as a composer and as a conductor. In 1902 Rachmaninov married Natalya Satina and went on to pursue a career that was bringing him increasing international fame. There were journeys abroad and a busy professional life, from which summer holidays at the estate of Ivanovka, which he finally acquired from the Satins in 1910, provided respite. During the war, however depressing the circumstances, he continued his concert engagements, not being required for military service, as he had anticipated. All this was interrupted by the abdication of the Tsar in 1917 and the beginning of the Revolution.

Rachmaninov left Russia in 1917. From then until his death in Beverly Hills in 1943, he was obliged to rely largely on performance for a living. Now there was, in consequence, much less time for composition, as he undertook demanding concert-tours, during which he dazzled audiences in Europe and America with his remarkable powers as a pianist. His house at Ivanovka was destroyed in the Russian civil war and in 1931, the year of his *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, his music was banned in Russia, to be permitted once again two years later. He spent much time in America, where there were lucrative concert-tours, but established a music publishing-house in Paris and built for himself a villa near Lucerne, where he completed his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* in 1934 and his *Third Symphony* a year later.

In 1939 he left Europe, to spend his final years in the United States. Rachmaninov wrote his *Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor* in 1900 and 1901, dedicating it to Dr Nikolay Dahl. The second and third movements of this most popular of all romantic concertos were completed in the summer of 1900 and the first movement in the following year. In November 1901 it was performed in Moscow under the direction of Ziloti, with the composer as soloist, and was received with the greatest enthusiasm. The work has retained its position in concert repertoire, although it has at the same time had a less fortunate influence on lesser works that have nothing of the innovative inspiration of their model.

The first movement of the concerto opens with a series of dramatic chords from the soloist, an introduction to the first theme, proposed by the strings, accompanied by piano arpeggios. The second subject, quite properly in E flat major, is introduced by a phrase on the viola, before its statement by the soloist, rhapsodic in style, to be further developed in a central section, before a great dynamic climax and the return of the first subject, now marked *Maestoso*. Calm returns for the orchestra to return to the second subject, now with an air of intense nostalgia, before the final coda. In the slow movement the orchestra moves from C minor to the remoter key of E major, to be joined by the soloist in music of characteristic figuration, with the principal theme introduced by flute and clarinet, before being taken up by the soloist. There is a central section of greater animation and mounting tension, leading to a powerful cadenza, followed by the return of the principal theme. With scarcely a pause the orchestra embarks on the final *Allegro scherzando*, providing the necessary modulation to the original key. A piano cadenza leads to the first theme, while a second theme, marked *Moderato*, is announced by the oboe and violas. Both are treated rhapsodically by the soloist, the second theme offering a romantic contrast to the more energetic rhythm of the first. In form the movement is a rondo, with the first theme largely keeping its original key and the second providing harmonic variety in different keys, the first making its second appearance in contrapuntal imitation. The concerto ends with a grandiose apotheosis of the second theme in a triumphant C major.

Rachmaninov gave the first performance of his technically demanding *Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor* in New York on 28th November, 1909, having apparently practised the solo part during the sea-crossing to America on a dummy keyboard. He had written the work at Ivanovka during the summer and towards the end of his life refused to play the work, which he preferred to entrust to the younger pianists Vladimir Horowitz and Walter Gieseking, surprising diffidence in a player of his distinction. The first performance under Damrosch was followed by a Carnegie Hall performance in January, 1910, under Gustav Mahler, to be greeted with critical reservations about its length and excessive difficulties. The composer has left an account of the rehearsal with Mahler, who spared the orchestra nothing in his preparation of the work. The rehearsal was called for ten o'clock, with Rachmaninov, as soloist, asked to attend an hour later. Work on the concerto did not start until midday, leaving only half an hour more available. Mahler, however, continued a further three quarters of an hour, before announcing that they would now play again the first movement. It was after an hour and a half of extra rehearsal time that Mahler finished, even then insisting that no player should leave so

long as he was on the podium. Rachmaninov recalls with respect Mahler's necessary strictness of discipline and his dedication and care.

The principal theme of the first movement is announced at the beginning by the soloist with great simplicity, over a gentle orchestral accompaniment, a melody which one writer has traced to the Russian Orthodox liturgy. This opening theme is of considerable importance, since much that follows is derived from it, in one way or another. There is an expressive second subject, derived from a rhythmic figure heard in the preceding transition and heard as various instruments join in duet with the soloist. The first subject provides the basis of the central development. There is an extended cadenza, for the first part of which the composer offered a marginally simpler and shorter version. This is interrupted by a woodwind return to the first subject, to continue, finally followed by a much abbreviated recapitulation. The *Intermezzo*, marked *Adagio*, opens in A major with thematic material that bears a strong enough resemblance to an element of the principal theme of the first movement. The soloist makes more of this and at the centre of the movement, in a section in the mood of a scherzo, provides an accompaniment to the first-movement theme with changed note values, now allotted to clarinet and bassoon. There is a cadenza, before the movement moves forward without a break to the virtuoso *Finale*. Here the overall unity of the work is further ensured by the reference, before the recapitulation, to the two first-movement themes and a later reminiscence of the rhythm with which the concerto had opened, implicit, in any case, in the first theme of the movement. Other thematic material is introduced at the outset, the first of four themes to be introduced rhythmically derived from the principal theme of the first movement and leading to a brusquely ascending figure, to massive syncopated chords and to a romantic fourth element, the second subject proper. The development of the material offers further opportunities for great virtuosity and, as in the other movements, there is a cadenza, after the return of the four thematic elements in recapitulation, and a final coda that sets the seal on a romantic virtuoso concerto that takes the form to its peak.

Rachmaninov as Pianist

There is no doubt that Rachmaninov owed a great deal to his teacher, Nikolay Sergeyevich Zverev, who taught at the Moscow Conservatory from 1870 until his death in 1893 and provided the young Rachmaninov with the necessary degree of discipline in strict routine practice. Zverev was himself a pupil of Alexander Ivanovich Dubuque, who, in turn, had been a pupil of John Field. The routine of the day began, at Zverev's, with practice at six o'clock in the morning and continuing practice once Zverev had left for his Conservatory classes at nine. It was with Zverev that Rachmaninov acquired his own excellent technical foundation, continued under Zverev's former pupil Ziloti at the Conservatory from 1888. It is true that Rachmaninov rebelled against his teacher, finding that he needed peace to concentrate rather on composition, moving to lodge with his relations, the Satins. Because of Ziloti's resignation from the Conservatory, he took his final piano examinations a year early, in 1891, passing with honours. Thereafter he was able to concentrate on composition.

In Russia Rachmaninov enjoyed a varied career. He appeared as a pianist, but principally in his own works, and had a parallel and more important career as a conductor and composer. This came to an end with the Revolution and his departure abroad. In exile it became apparent to him that the only means he now had of supporting himself and his family was as a concert pianist. His repertoire had been relatively limited. He had a few concertos, including Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No.1*, which he had played in 1917 in aid of the revolutionary army, and some works of Chopin and Liszt, in addition to his own works. Moving almost immediately from Stockholm to Denmark, he set about improving his technique and consolidating his repertoire. In the following months in Scandinavia he appeared as soloist in his own *Piano Concerto No.2*, Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No.1* and Liszt's *Piano Concerto No.1* and gave recitals of his own compositions. By the autumn of 1918 he found himself able to give a more balanced recital programme, with music ranging from Mozart and Schubert to Tchaikovsky.

It soon became clear to Rachmaninov that America was likely to provide the engagements and rewards he now needed. He gave the first of what were to be many American concerts in December 1918. He had acquired the support of Steinway's and a competent manager and soon found himself with a series of 36 engagements for his first season and some seventy for the next one. The process seemed to continue inexorably, with season after season, and periods of rest and preparation intervening in the summer months. In 1920 he came to an agreement with the Victor Talking Machine Company,

later owned by RCA, and was able to record, over the years, much of his own repertoire. As time went on, he was later able to reduce the number of his American engagements, moving back to Europe, which remained essentially his home until 1939, when he found it prudent to return permanently to America once more. His American tours remained an essential part of his life until his death in 1943.

As a pianist Rachmaninov was an intelligent, thoughtful and careful performer, meticulous in his preparation. He had large hands, able to span a chord of a thirteenth with the left hand and with a remarkable stretch also in the right, spanning a tenth by taking the lower note with the first finger and the upper note by thumb-crossing. He was always aware of a sense of direction in what he played and of a point of culmination, of whatever kind, the whole executed with impeccable precision, a fine singing tone, where this was called for, rhythmic energy and a clarity of definition, even in passages of great complexity.

Leopold Stokowski

Of Polish and Irish parentage, the conductor Leopold Stokowski was born in London in 1882 and entered the Royal College of Music at the age of thirteen. He served as organist at St James's in Piccadilly, took a bachelor's degree in music at Oxford and in 1905 took a position as an organist in New York. He made his first appearance as a conductor in Paris in 1908. This led to an appointment as conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and in 1912 to the start of his long association with the Philadelphia Orchestra, where he did much to introduce new repertoire in performances of increasing technical brilliance. Between 1936 and 1938 he shared his position in Philadelphia with his successor, Eugene Ormandy, thereafter leaving to pursue an independent career with new or established orchestra. He continued his distinguished career into old age, giving his last concert in July 1977, a few weeks before his death.

Eugene Ormandy

Eugene Ormandy was born in 1899 in Budapest, where he studied the violin, latterly with Hubay. An abortive concert-tour to America undertaken in 1921 found him obliged to serve as a violinist in the orchestra of the Capitol Theatre, providing an accompaniment to silent films. It was here that he made his début as a conductor in 1924. In the following years he was engaged for broadcast concerts of popular classics and for summer concerts, some with the Philadelphia Orchestra. In 1931 he began a five-year association with the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, increasing his reputation notably by his recordings. In 1936 he joined Stokowski in Philadelphia, succeeding him in 1938, to remain at the helm of that orchestra for the next 35 years, developing further the work of his predecessor. He died in 1985.

Technical Information

Piano Concerto No. 2 was recorded on matrices CVE-48963-3, 48964-1, 48965-1, 48966-1, 48967-3, 48969-2, 48970-1, 48971-2, 48972-2 and 48973-1. First issued on Victor 8148/52 [M-58]

Piano Concerto No. 3 was recorded on matrices CS-045627-1, 045628-1, 045629-1, 045630-1, 045631-1, 045632-2A, 045633-1, 045634-3 and 045635-1. First issued on Victor 17481/5 [M-710]



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Sergey

RACHMANINOV

(1873 - 1943)

AAD

 Playing Time:
65' 10"

Piano Concertos Nos. 2 and 3

 Sergey Rachmaninov, Piano
 The Philadelphia Orchestra
 Leopold Stokowski • Eugene Ormandy*

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18

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|----------|--------------------|---------|
| 1 | Moderato - Allegro | (9:45) |
| 2 | Adagio sostenuto | (10:40) |
| 3 | Allegro scherzando | (10:52) |

Recorded on 10th and 13th April, 1929

Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, Op. 30*

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|----------|----------------------|---------|
| 4 | Allegro ma non tanto | (13:51) |
| 5 | Intermezzo: Adagio | (8:39) |
| 6 | Finale: Alla breve | (11:22) |

Recorded on 4th December, 1939 and 24th February, 1940

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