

## PROGRAM NOTES

### **Sergei Rachmaninov - Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18**

#### **Sergei Rachmaninov**

*Born April 1, 1873, Semyonovo, Russia.*

*Died March 28, 1943, Beverly Hills, California.*

#### **Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18**

Rachmaninov composed his Second Piano Concerto in 1900–1901 and was soloist for the first performance on November 9, 1901, in Moscow. The orchestra consists of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty-two minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto were given at Orchestra Hall on December 3 and 4, 1909, with the composer as soloist and Frederick Stock conducting. Rachmaninov also appeared as soloist in his Second Piano Concerto on January 12, 1932, with Frederick Stock conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on February 7, 8, 9, and 10, 2002, with Lang Lang as soloist and Manfred Honeck conducting. The Orchestra first performed this concerto at the Ravinia Festival on July 23, 1938, with Gitta Gradova as soloist and Eugene Goossens conducting, and most recently on July 20, 2008, with Lang Lang as soloist and James Conlon conducting.

All his life, Rachmaninov was prone to anxiety and depression, a condition often reflected in his sour expression—"a six-and-a-half-foot scowl," Stravinsky called him. Family and friends knew a warmer, more outgoing personality, but they also encountered a crippling, dark side of his nature the public never saw. The low point—one so debilitating that it nearly robbed us of some of the most popular music ever written—came in the last years of the nineteenth century, just as his career was getting started.

Rachmaninov enjoyed great public success early on, both as a pianist and a composer. The brooding piano prelude in C-sharp minor he composed in 1892, at the age of nineteen, immediately became the calling card of a young artist's dreams—and eventually a burden as well. Audiences wouldn't let him leave the stage until he played the work he eventually referred to dismissively as "it."

With the premiere of his First Symphony in Saint Petersburg in 1897, under the baton of Alexander Glazunov, Rachmaninov's confidence and momentum—if not his entire career—suddenly seemed to fizzle. The performance must have been appalling—Rachmaninov called it “the most agonizing hour of my life.” He hid in a stairwell, with his hands over his ears. (Glazunov was later said to have been drunk when he walked on stage.) And the opening-night review, by composer César Cui, could hardly have been worse—the symphony, Cui concluded, “would have brought ecstasy to the inhabitants of hell.”

For the next three years, Rachmaninov wrote nothing—sketches for a new symphony were abandoned, and work on an opera, *Francesca da Rimini*, was shelved. He continued to perform, and even undertook a concert tour to London in 1898, but day after day he found that he was unable to compose. As he grew more despondent, his friends began to recommend various remedies. Twice he visited Leo Tolstoy, once by himself and once with the bass Fyodor Chaliapin, hoping that contact with the great novelist would shake him out of his slump and jump-start his creativity, but the writer's self-serving platitudes discouraged him even more. (“You must work,” Tolstoy told him. “I work every day.”) When he and Chaliapin performed one of Rachmaninov's songs, Tolstoy wasted no words in conveying how much he disliked it. Finally, fearing that Rachmaninov was trapped in a serious depression, his family suggested that he consult Dr. Nikolai Dahl, a Paris internist who had become a specialist in curing alcoholism through hypnosis. (Undone by Glazunov's drunken butchery of his First Symphony, Rachmaninov had begun to drink heavily himself.) In January 1900, he began to see Dahl, who was also a gifted amateur violinist and cellist (he had started his own string quartet). The main objective was to get Rachmaninov back on track—to restore his appetite and improve his sleep, to curtail his drinking, to revive his morale, and to get him composing again. The immediate assignment, which Dahl took very seriously, was for Rachmaninov to write a new piano concerto. (He had promised one to the London Philharmonic when he appeared with the orchestra in 1898.) Through a combination of enlightened discussion and rudimentary hypnosis (“You will begin your concerto . . . it will be excellent,” was one of the mantras), Dahl succeeded. “Although it may seem incredible,” Rachmaninov wrote many years later, “this cure helped me. New musical ideas began to stir within me—far more than I needed for my concerto.”

In April, Rachmaninov felt well enough to accompany Chaliapin to Yalta, where they visited Chekhov, and on to Italy, where the singer made his La Scala debut in Boito's *Mephistopheles*. By July, when Rachmaninov was ready to go home—“bored without Russians and Russia”—and get to work, he had a stack of sketches to pack, including advanced drafts for two movements of a new piano concerto in C minor. Those movements—the ones we know as the second and third—were finished in the fall and premiered at a benefit concert in early December. Although Rachmaninov came down with a cold the day before the concert—and despite drinking mulled wine to cure it—he played magnificently. In the spring he wrote the opening movement, a highly original piece of music that seemed to confirm his recovery. Then, just five days before the premiere of the complete concerto, Rachmaninov suffered a temporary setback and was paralyzed by fears that his new work was worthless. The premiere, with the composer at the keyboard, was a major triumph, nevertheless, and the concerto quickly became Rachmaninov's greatest hit, nearly replacing the beloved C-sharp minor prelude in the public's affection. The C minor concerto was his new calling card, and he performed it around the world. He played it with the Chicago Symphony when he made his debut in Orchestra Hall on December 3, 1909—the first of his eight appearances with the orchestra. (The last was in 1943, little more than a month before his death.)

With this concerto, Rachmaninov not only overcame writer's block, but he found a new voice as a composer—one with a perfect knack for unforgettable tunes, dazzling pianistic effects, an effortless flow of ideas, and a very suave sense of style. Stravinsky, his close contemporary—and antithesis, as well—later called it a switch from a very young composer to a very old one, not meaning it as a compliment. The C minor concerto is proudly old-fashioned, particularly for 1901—the heyday of wild and radical new music by Debussy, Mahler, Stravinsky, Strauss, Ives, and Schoenberg. It's one of the crowning works of the nineteenth century, despite the calendar, and, to the chagrin of the avant-garde, it quickly became the most beloved concerto of the twentieth.

The C minor concerto begins memorably, with a soft tolling in the piano that grows to a grand fortissimo. The entire first theme, introduced by the strings and clarinet, seems in retrospect a very sumptuous introduction to the big moment when the orchestra falls silent and the piano solo takes the spotlight with a grand melody. It's a perfectly calculated effect, but it's one of the things that worried Rachmaninov in the days before the premiere (“When I begin the second theme no fool would believe it to be a second theme,” he wrote to a former classmate. “Everybody will think this is the beginning of the concerto.”) For all the piano's continuous bravura, however, its role throughout this movement is more often that of ensemble player, accompanist, or even member of the orchestra, than star soloist. This is one of Rachmaninov's subtlest and most tightly knit movements.

The Adagio is in the distant key of E major. (Beethoven, ever the pioneer, used the same unexpected key relationship between the first two movements of his Third Piano Concerto, written exactly a hundred years earlier.) Once again, the piano moves easily between its roles of soloist and accompanist (the clarinet has a big solo early on). The relationship between piano and orchestra is unusually delicate throughout, and the scoring is often as transparent as chamber music.

The finale, beginning in E major and quickly swinging around to C minor, has many wonderful moments, but it's usually remembered as the brilliant setting of Rachmaninov's most famous tune, the one that made a fortune for Buddy Kaye and Ted Mossman (and not a penny for Rachmaninov) as “Full Moon and Empty Arms.” (The young Sinatra made his classic recording in 1945, two years after Rachmaninov's death.) Rachmaninov was the first to recognize the melody's worth, and he uses it three times in the finale, each time freshening it with new touches, the last and grandest of them inspiring countless Hollywood composers. (Ironically, Rachmaninov, who ultimately moved to Beverly Hills, never wrote for films, even though his style was the industry standard for years.) The last word is given to the piano, in an outburst of glittering bravura.

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*

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