Sergei Rachmaninov – Piano Concerto No. 4 in G Minor, Op. 40

**Sergei Rachmaninov**

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

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

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Although Rachmaninov's music is sometimes confused with the treacly romanticism of the Hollywood soundtracks it once inspired, Rachmaninov himself was a serious and aristocratic artist. He was one of the greatest pianists in history—an astonishing virtuoso in the heroic tradition of Liszt—but there was nothing flashy about his stage manner. Rachmaninov was surprisingly somber and remote for a crowd-pleasing superstar. He rarely smiled or courted the audience, and even his close-cropped haircut, of a kind that is ubiquitous today but was highly suspect at the time (like that of a convict, as the Russian bass Fyodor Chaliapin said) suggested a stern presence. (Chaliapin also scolded him for his curt, peremptory bows.) Much later, Stravinsky called him "a six-and-a-half-foot-tall scowl."

Rachmaninov would have become famous if he had done nothing but concertize, but his true aspiration was to become a composer. At the Moscow Conservatory, his teacher Nikolai Zverev encouraged him to stick to the piano instead of writing music, but Rachmaninov tried his hand at composing some piano pieces and an orchestral scherzo, and he even started an opera, *Esmerelda*. Unable to choose between composition and performance, Rachmaninov ultimately decided to pursue both, eventually becoming a fine conductor as well. In 1889, the year he and Zverev parted ways, he sketched and abandoned a piano concerto, but the one he began the following year is his first major work—the one that became his op. 1. This is the score that made his name as a composer, and it was completed in a rush of passion and elation, with Rachmaninov working from five in the morning until eight in the evening and scoring the last two movements in just two and a half days.

It would be ten years, however, before Rachmaninov would finish his Second Piano Concerto, which quickly became his greatest hit and his calling card. He played it with the Chicago Symphony when he made his debut in Orchestra Hall, on December 3, 1909—the first of his seven appearances with the Orchestra. By then, Rachmaninov also had written a third piano concerto, tailor-made for his first North American tour later that year. He introduced it in New York the week before his Chicago debut, and then played it there again in January, this time with Gustav Mahler conducting. (Rachmaninov played it when he appeared with the Chicago Symphony for the second time, in January 1920.)
But shortly after finishing his third piano concerto, Rachmaninov's composing slowed to a near stop, and from 1918 to 1926 he wrote nothing new at all. Then, during the final seventeen years of his life, he composed just six pieces, including a fourth piano concerto, the Third Symphony, the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, and the Symphonic Dances. Thirty-nine of Rachmaninov's forty-five opus numbers were finished by the time he and his family left revolutionary Russia in late 1917, never to return. Although he enjoyed extraordinary popularity after he settled in the United States in 1921, he clearly didn't find it conducive to composition.

It's unclear when Rachmaninov began his fourth piano concerto. As early as April 1914, a news item in a magazine said he was planning a new concerto, and he apparently worked on it intermittently over the next few years. But only in 1924, after considerable prodding from his friend, pianist Nikolai Medtner, did Rachmaninov get down to business. He finished the score in 1926, dedicating it to Medtner. Rachmaninov wrote to him on September 26, saying that he was worried about its length: "Perhaps it will have to be given like Wagner's Ring cycle, over the course of several consecutive evenings," he joked. He had started looking for possible cuts—"I have already found one, but only eight measures," he wrote. He also was concerned that the orchestra was almost never silent—"It's less like a concerto for piano and more like a concerto for piano and orchestra"—and that the slow-movement melody too closely resembled the main theme of Schumann's concerto. Medtner wrote back that he found the concerto not a bit too long (it's shorter than either of Rachmaninov's two previous concertos), and he chastised Rachmaninov for worrying over such niceties while the hotshot modernists were setting out to destroy the very foundations of music that he and Rachmaninov both believed in.

Rachmaninov was painfully aware that his music was out of step with the times—this is the decade of Berg's Wozzeck, Stravinsky's Les noces, Bartók's First Piano Concerto, and Schoenberg's Variations for Orchestra, after all. "I feel like a ghost wandering a world grown alien," he said in 1926. "I cannot cast out the old way of writing, and I cannot acquire the new. The new kind of music seems to come, not from the heart, but from the head. Its composers think rather than feel." When the premiere of the Fourth Concerto was given a lukewarm reception in Philadelphia the following year—the Herald Tribune's Lawrence Gilman dismissively called it "essentially nineteenth century"—Rachmaninov took it hard; he went back to work, eventually cutting 114 measures and rewriting the first twelve pages. After he toured with the reworked concerto in 1929 and 1930, he was still dissatisfied, and he set the score aside until the summer of 1941, when he revised it again, this time concentrating on the finale. This is the version he played with the Chicago Symphony that November, in his next-to-last appearance with the Orchestra.

The Fourth Piano Concerto has never achieved the popularity of Rachmaninov's previous two, but it is quintessential Rachmaninov nonetheless. It is, if not "essentially nineteenth century," very much in keeping with the composer's earliest successes, and several of its themes, including the surging, wayward music that opens the concerto, belong to an etude-tableau that Rachmaninov omitted from the set he published in 1914. The second theme of the finale is based on the plainchant Dies irae, to which Rachmaninov would turn once again in his Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini. The solo writing is formidable, but less flashy than in the earlier concertos—there isn't a single cadenza here, a surprise since the piece was written to showcase the composer's own famous talents.
Throughout Rachmaninov's life, it was fashionable—if not in fact honorable in progressive music circles—to disparage his music. Rachmaninov had always worried that by splitting his time between playing the piano, conducting, and composing, he had spread himself too thin. "I have chased three hares," he once said. "Can I be certain that I have captured one?"

For many years, Rachmaninov's stature as a pianist was undisputed. But by the time of his death in 1943 (he appeared with the Chicago Symphony for the last time just six weeks before he died), he had been written off as an old-fashioned composer—hopelessly sentimental, out-of-touch, and irrelevant. As Virgil Thomson told the young playwright Edward Albee in 1948, "It is really extraordinary, after all, that a composer so famous should have enjoyed so little the esteem of his fellow composers." The sacrosanct *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, in its fifth edition, concluded its dismal appraisal of his output: "The enormous popular success some few of Rachmaninov's works had in his lifetime is not likely to last and musicians never regarded it with much favor." But in the past few years, his star has been on the rise. Now, as Rachmaninov always hoped, it is his music and not his piano playing that keeps his name alive.

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