



Sergei RACHMANINOFF

Piano concerto No. 4

Sergei Vasilievich Rachmaninoff (April 1, 1873–March 28, 1943) was a Russian virtuoso pianist, composer, and conductor of the late-Romantic period, some of whose works are among the most popular in the classical repertoire. Born into a musical family, Rachmaninoff took up the piano at age four. He graduated from the Moscow Conservatory in 1892 and had composed several piano and orchestral pieces by this time. In 1897, following the critical reaction to his Symphony No. 1, Rachmaninoff entered a four-year depression and composed little until successful therapy allowed him to complete his enthusiastically received Piano Concerto No. 2 in 1901. After the Russian Revolution, Rachmaninoff and his family left Russia and resided in the United States, first in New York City. Demanding piano concert tour schedules caused his output as composer to slow tremendously; between 1918 and 1943, he completed just six compositions, including Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Symphony No. 3, and Symphonic Dances. In 1942, Rachmaninoff moved to Beverly Hills, California. One month before his death from advanced melanoma, Rachmaninoff acquired American citizenship. Early influences of Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Balakirev, Mussorgsky, and other Russian composers gave way to a personal style notable for its song-like melodicism, expressiveness and his use of rich orchestral colors. The piano is featured prominently in Rachmaninoff's compositional output, and through his own skills as a performer he explored the expressive possibilities of the instrument.

Although completed in 1926 and premiered in 1927, work on his ***Piano Concerto No. 4*** may have begun as early as 1911. By this time, Rachmaninoff's compositional style had changed. Even if he did not like most of what he heard, he was at least aware of what Bartók, Hindemith, Stravinsky, Schoenberg and Les Six were writing. By 1916, critics noticed a new angularity and pungency in his Op. 39 *Études-Tableaux*, along with a more severe, concentrated and deepened mode of expression. This was influenced in part by Rachmaninoff's study of Scriabin's music for the memorial recitals he played in 1915; this study bore further fruit in the works Rachmaninoff wrote after leaving Russia. Had Rachmaninoff stayed in Russia, and the Bolsheviks' rise to power never taken place, the Fourth Piano Concerto probably would have been premiered around 1919, eight years earlier than its actual unveiling.

Many have noted Rachmaninoff's inspiration from George Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue, a piece for piano and orchestra completed in 1924, only three years before Rachmaninoff premiered his own. His presence at the premiere of the Gershwin Rhapsody on February 12, 1924 is well known. Sometimes less remembered is that he was a faithful and long-time enthusiast of Paul Whiteman's jazz orchestra, which hosted the premiere, even sending his daughter the Whiteman orchestra's newest records every month. He also listened to orchestral jazz by both the black jazz orchestras then playing regularly in New York — those of Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington — and later became a devoted enthusiast of pianist Art Tatum. Tenor John McCormack remembered Rachmaninoff himself playing jazz for his own amusement.

These jazz elements, most felt, were not consistent with Rachmaninoff's previous brooding and dark themes. What they failed to realize was that, though some aspects of the concerto had roots in Imperial Russia, the piece had been written mainly in New York, and finished in Western Europe. The composer was a sharp, intelligent and sensitive man who had naturally been affected by the sights and sounds of the country in which he had resided for the last several years. Any romantic aura had long dissipated.

The concerto was premiered in Philadelphia on March 18, 1927, with the composer as soloist and Leopold Stokowski leading the Philadelphia Orchestra. After a second performance on March 19, Rachmaninoff performed the work with Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra in New York on March 22.