

**SERGEY RACHMANINOV**

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

**BORN:** Semyonovo, Russia, April 1, 1873

**DIED:** Los Angeles, March 28, 1943

**WORK COMPOSED:** 1909

**WORLD PREMIERE:** November 28, 1909, in New York. The composer was the piano soloist, and Walter Damrosch conducted the New York Symphony.

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The element of virtuosity for which this concerto is famous is not present from the start. Instead, Rachmaninov uses the piano in a restrained manner to state the first theme of the opening movement. But with this done, the solo instrument adds glittering figuration to the orchestra's restatement of the theme, establishing transcendent keyboard technique as a key aspect of the piece.

The concerto's initial theme returns in varied form during the second movement. Other material from the opening movement recurs in the finale.

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"Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto was written for his first American tour. This mighty piece has helped shape my way of playing the piano. Through its immense musical and technical challenges, as well as tone production demands, this concerto itself has the power to teach and dictate the necessary means of expression. While the piece is famous for its melodic beauty and technical difficulty, its structural inventiveness is often overlooked. The large solo cadenza in the middle of the first movement is simultaneously a recapitulation of the opening, thus making the movement a sonata form in an original way. This placement of the cadenza in the middle, rather than at the end of the movement, is a tip of the hat to Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto. The quick waltz in the second movement is Rachmaninov's homage to Tchaikovsky, whose First Piano Concerto contains a waltz-like scherzo in the slow movement as well.

"Seattle was actually the first place in the US that I travelled to. This was in 1991 and I was a part of a Russian cultural exchange delegation. So, I have a particularly soft spot for this city, though that is not difficult — it is a wonderful place to visit (and I am addicted to coffee)."

– Kirill Gerstein

Sergey Rachmaninov composed his Third Piano Concerto in 1909 and played the solo part in its initial performance, given in New York in November of that year. One of the earliest reviews of the concerto noted that its "extreme difficulties bar it from performance by any but pianists of exceptional technical powers." The work has indeed become famous as an Everest for pianists, so much so that it served as an emblem for daunting pianistic challenge in *Shine*, the 1996 film about the Australian pianist David Helfgott.

Rachmaninov composed this work at a time his career and his production as a composer were enjoying a period of ascendancy. Some years earlier, the critical failure of his First Symphony had plunged the Russian musician into a state of depression and creative torpor. For three years he idled away much of his time at the rural estates of family and friends. (One imagines his life at this time as something out of a play by Chekhov.) Eventually, however, he regained confidence in his abilities and began writing again, producing a stream of music that cemented his reputation as a composer.

With his renewed success came new opportunities. Early in 1909 Rachmaninov received an offer to undertake an extensive concert tour of the United States. Initially he hesitated to accept, not wishing to absent himself from his family for a period of months. But the financial terms of the offer were too generous to pass up. Rachmaninov was particularly tempted by the possibility of purchasing an automobile during his stay in America.

In accepting the American invitation, Rachmaninov agreed to compose a new piano concerto that he would perform with several orchestras. All through the spring of 1909 various obligations prevented him from working on this piece, and it was not until June that he set to writing it. The composition went smoothly, however, and the piece was finished before the end of summer.

But Rachmaninov had not had time to learn the demanding solo part before his departure for the United States. He therefore brought a practice keyboard along on the voyage and on this device worked to master the concerto's intricacies. This unusual practicum proved sufficient. Rachmaninov played the concerto with consistent success throughout his American tour. A notable performance occurred on January 16, 1910, at Carnegie Hall in New York, when the orchestra was led by Gustav Mahler.

Apart from its obvious virtuosity, the concerto's musical character derives chiefly from two traits that inform Rachmaninov's output as a whole: an unabashedly lush and effusive Romanticism and a certain Russian melancholy. The composer establishes the latter quality at the beginning of the work with a theme given out by the piano as a spare melodic line over minimal orchestral accompaniment. The minor-mode contours of this subject suggest an old Russian song. One musicologist even proposed that it derives from a Russian Orthodox Church chant, though Rachmaninov insisted that it "is borrowed neither from folk song nor from liturgical sources. It simply wrote itself." Later we hear a second subject, a warmly romantic idea announced by the piano alone, and a third theme that has something of the character of a march. The development of these materials leads to a thunderous climax and a long, extremely demanding cadenza solo. An abbreviated reprise of the initial subject then brings the movement to a quiet conclusion.

The second movement, which Rachmaninov describes as an "*intermezzo*," entails two highly contrasted types of music. Its initial section considers a quiet theme introduced by the strings but worked up by the piano into an almost vehemently impassioned expression. Suddenly, however, the tempo quickens, the texture becomes gossamer, and the music assumes the manner of an animated scherzo. Here the orchestral woodwinds give out a variant of the main theme of the first movement. The finale, which follows without pause, is the concerto's most spirited movement, and it provides a thrilling display of keyboard virtuosity.

*Scored for solo piano; pairs of woodwinds; 4 horns; 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani and percussion; strings.*