
SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873-1943)

Piano Concerto No.1 in F sharp minor
fa dièse mineur · fis-Moll, op.1

Piano Concerto No.2 in C minor
ut mineur · c-Moll, op.18

Piano Concerto No.3 in D minor
ré mineur · d-Moll, op.30

Piano Concerto No.4 in G minor
sol mineur · g-Moll, op.40

VLADIMIR ASHKENAZY
Concertgebouw Orchestra
BERNARD HAITINK

CD 1 421 591-2 (71.29)

Timing · Durée · Spielzeit

Piano Concerto No.1 in F sharp minor, op.1

- | | | |
|----------|--------------------|---------|
| 1 | I Vivace | (13.08) |
| 2 | II Andante | (6.44) |
| 3 | III Allegro vivace | (8.09) |

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

- | | | |
|----------|------------------------|---------|
| 4 | I Allegro ma non tanto | (17.31) |
| 5 | II Intermezzo: Adagio | (11.31) |
| 6 | III Finale: Alla breve | (14.26) |

CD 2 421 592-2 (62.07)

Timing · Durée · Spielzeit

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

- | | | |
|----------|------------------------|---------|
| 1 | I Moderato | (11.33) |
| 2 | II Adagio sostenuto | (11.27) |
| 3 | III Allegro scherzando | (11.17) |

Piano Concerto No.4 in G minor, op.40

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|----------|--------------------|---------|
| 4 | I Allegro vivace | (10.29) |
| 5 | II Largo | (7.35) |
| 6 | III Allegro vivace | (9.46) |

DDD

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SERGEI RACHMANINOV THE FOUR PIANO CONCERTOS

In my own compositions, no conscious effort has been made to be original, or Romantic, or Nationalistic, or anything else. I write down on paper the music I hear within me, as naturally as possible. I am a Russian composer, and the land of my birth has influenced my temperament and outlook. My music is the product of my temperament, and so it is Russian music; I never consciously attempted to write Russian music, or any other kind of music. I have been strongly influenced by Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov; but I have never, to the best of my knowledge, imitated anyone.

What I try to do, when writing down my music, is to make it say simply and directly that which is in my heart when I am composing.

If there is love there, or bitterness, or sadness, or religion, these moods become a part of my music, and it becomes either beautiful or bitter or sad or religious.

Sergei Rachmaninov, 1941

Piano Concerto No.1 in F sharp minor, op.1

This concerto, Rachmaninov's first completed concerted work, was revised in 1917 just before the composer left Russia at the time of the Revolution. The early version (1890-91) owes something to the pianistic and orchestral techniques of Rimsky-Korsakov in his Piano Concerto in C sharp minor, completed less than a decade earlier, though Rachmaninov's three-movement structure is more traditional than Rimsky-Korsakov's one-movement work. As well as the older Russian composer's work, Rachmaninov was influenced by the Schumann and Grieg concertos in that the concerto has an arresting introductory flourish, including brilliant piano passage-work, which recurs at crucial points in the movement; for example, towards the end of the exposition after the delightful second subject in the relative major key of A, in the course of the recapitulation of the passionately yearning first subject, and in the dazzling cadenza and succinct coda. The dramatic drop of a

semitone between the slow movement, a beautiful nocturne in D major containing some ravishing modulations, and the opening of the scherzo-like finale, derives from Beethoven's Fifth Piano Concerto. Yet in spite of these and other derivations, this concerto is one of Rachmaninov's best, especially with the greater conciseness and rhythmic suppleness achieved in the revised version of the finale, which originally tended to be rather trite; Rachmaninov benefited much from the experience gained in the Second and Third Concertos, written in the interim. Nevertheless, in the 1917 version no alteration is made to the shape or content of the themes, which retain their youthful freshness; though already tinged with nostalgia in their Romantic expansiveness, they lack the melancholic lugubriousness of some of Rachmaninov's later melodic outpourings. The comparative neglect of this fine concerto is unaccountable.

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

'I'm simply in despair!', Rachmaninov wrote to his friend Nikita Morozov in the autumn of 1901. Morozov, a former fellow-student of his in the composition class at the Moscow Conservatory, had looked over the score of the Second Piano Concerto and had passed some adverse comment on the first movement. 'You are right, Nikita Semyonovich!', Rachmaninov's letter began. 'I have just played through the first movement of my concerto, and only now has it suddenly become clear to me that the transition from the first theme to the second is no good; in this form, the first theme is not a first theme but an introduction. Not a single fool would believe, when I start to play the second theme, that that is precisely what it is. Everyone will think that it's the beginning of the concerto. In my opinion the whole movement is spoiled and from this moment I find it positively offensive... And why on earth did you pester me with your analysis five days before the performance...?'

So firmly entrenched has the Second Concerto become in the repertory that Rachmaninov's reaction to Morozov's criticism might today seem a little oversensitive; yet it must be remembered that at the turn of the century Rachmaninov was

only just emerging from that enervating period of self-doubt caused by the catastrophic performance of his First Symphony in 1897. For the next three years or so, he was unable to bring himself to compose anything of importance, but during the summer of 1900, while staying in Italy with Shalyapin, he wrote his unaccompanied anthem *Panteley-tselitel* (Panteley the Healer), conceived the bulk of the love duet for his Dante opera *Francesca da Rimini*, and began work on the Second Concerto. He played the second and third movements in Moscow in December that year, added the first movement in the spring of 1901, and gave the first complete performance on 27 October (9 November new style), dedicating the work to Dr Nikolay Dahl, whose treatment had been largely responsible for lifting him from his depression and restoring confidence in his creative abilities. The concerto was an immediate and lasting success, impressing as it does through the impassioned intensity of its long opening theme (the one he dismissed as an 'introduction'), through the spontaneity of its memorable melodic invention, and through its exquisite craftsmanship.

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

In the autumn of 1909 Rachmaninov embarked on his first concert tour of America, giving, as he himself reported 'an almost daily concert for three whole months... It was a strain.' In fact, for much of the summer it had been touch and go whether the contractual arrangements for the tour would be satisfactorily completed in time for him to get to America at all, but, even with these uncertainties, he worked steadily (and in characteristic secrecy) on the major new composition he planned to unveil in New York: his Third Piano Concerto. He wrote it in the peace and quiet of the family's country estate, Ivanovka, and dated the completed manuscript 'Moscow, 23 September 1909' (5 October, new style). From then it was only a matter of nine days before he had to sail across the Atlantic, and he practised the solo part on board ship, using a silent keyboard.

The tour started with recital at Northampton, Massachusetts, on 4 November; it continued with solo, concerto and conducting engagements all along the East Coast, before Rachmaninov joined the New York Symphony Orchestra for the premiere of the Third Concerto, given on 28 November at the New Theatre, New York, under Walter Damrosch. In January 1910 he repeated it at Carnegie Hall, this time with the New York Philharmonic

under Gustav Mahler, who as a conductor impressed Rachmaninov enormously. Critical opinion of the music was mixed. 'The *New York Herald*, while ranking it among 'the most interesting piano concertos of recent years', commented that 'its great length and extreme difficulties bar it from performances by any but pianists of exceptional technical powers'. The *New York Daily Tribune* remarked on 'the essential dignity and beauty of the music', but again criticised its length: 'Judicious curtailment would help the concerto to a deservedly long term of life'.

Rachmaninov did make some slight corrections to the manuscript, but they were all to do with fairly small points of detail. The score was published in full, and the process of 'curtailment' which he later applied in some performances and on his own recording of the concerto was in fact far from judicious. It has long been realised that the cuts which he sanctioned undermine the music's architectural grandeur: as with the Second Symphony, such a large-scale structure needs time to develop naturally, evolving as it does from the deceptively simple opening D minor melody into a work of impressive cohesiveness, subtle thematic cross-references and a spacious, richly varied design.

The piano writing is among the most colourful and resourceful that Rachmaninov ever conceived, in the first movement reaching its climax in the cadenza. Rachmaninov wrote two versions of this cadenza: his original thought was the bold, chordal version; the alternative is

lighter, filigreed, scherzo-like. On his own recording, Rachmaninov played the latter, but the choice is open to the individual preference of each pianist, and on the present recording Vladimir Ashkenazy chooses the more full-bodied version.

Piano Concerto No.4 in G minor, op.40

By contrast to the Second and Third Concertos, the Fourth took a good deal longer to become established. Rachmaninov composed it in New York and Dresden from January to August 1926, having contemplated a new concerto as early as 1914 and in fact incorporating into the central Largo a passage from a discarded C minor *Etude-tableau* written in 1911.

The concerto was first performed in Philadelphia on 18 March 1927, with the composer as soloist and the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Leopold Stokowski. It was dedicated to Rachmaninov's old friend Nikolay Medtner, who at about the same time was completing his own Second Piano Concerto which would, in its turn, be dedicated to Rachmaninov.

Even before the premiere, Rachmaninov was worried about the concerto's length, joking to Medtner that it would have to be performed on separate nights, like *The Ring*. The cuts and alterations he made then, and others made subsequently, did little to appease the concerto's critics, and it was not until 1941 that it achieved its definitive form, after further cuts and changes to the orchestration. Through all these vicissitudes, however, the concerto retained its essential grandeur and vigour, its harmonic pungency and its inventive interplay of piano and orchestral textures. It is a work shot through with Rachmaninov's characteristic nostalgia, but one in which his ideas are presented with all the vitality and thrust which mark the music of his later years.

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SERGEI RACHMANINOV LES QUATRE CONCERTOS POUR PIANO

Dans mes compositions, je ne fais aucun effort conscient pour être original, romantique, nationaliste ou quoi que ce soit d'autre.

J'écris sur le papier la musique que j'entends en moi, et aussi naturellement que possible. Je suis un compositeur russe, et le pays où je suis né a influencé mon tempérament et ma conception du monde. Ma musique est le produit de mon tempérament, de sorte qu'elle est de la musique russe; je ne me suis jamais efforcé consciemment d'écrire de la musique russe ni aucune autre sorte de musique. J'ai été fortement influencé par Tchaïkovski et Rimski-Korsakov; mais, dans la mesure de mes connaissances, je n'ai jamais imité qui que ce soit. Ce que j'essaie de faire, lorsque j'écris ma musique, c'est de lui faire dire simplement et directement ce qui est dans mon cœur lorsque je compose. Si c'est de l'amour, de l'amertume, de la tristesse ou de la piété, alors ces sentiments font partie de ma musique, qui devient belle, amère, triste ou pieuse.

Sergeï Rachmaninov, 1941