

## Piano Concerto No. 4 in G minor, Op. 40

### Sergei Rachmaninoff

As a youngster, Sergei Rachmaninoff enrolled on scholarship at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, but he proved so indifferent a student that the school threatened to curtail its support. His uncle, the pianist Aleksandr Ziloti, stepped in to provide a measure of discipline and arranged for him to study at the Moscow Conservatory instead. When Rachmaninoff graduated, in 1892, he received the Great Gold Medal, an honor that had been bestowed on only two students previously. He went on to a stellar piano career, earning acclaim as a refined, precise player of impressive technique and analytical approach.

He composed four piano concertos over the span of his career — in 1890–91, 1900–01, 1909, and 1926 (revised through 1941) — and was the soloist at the premiere of each. A pendant to these is a fifth, ever-popular work for piano and orchestra, the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, written during the summer of 1934. While the plush Second Concerto and the knuckle-busting Third, along with the Rhapsody, are popular repertoire items, the First and Fourth Concertos stand more toward the edge. The Fourth displays much of the spacious style and the demanding virtuosity of Rachmaninoff's earlier concertos, and the tightly coiled drama of the Rhapsody is also to be encountered in its pages. And yet, his Concerto No. 4 inhabits a world all its own and its distinct character has sometimes left listeners complaining about what it is not, instead of appreciating it for what it is: a work very much of its time, incorporating not only remnants of late Romanticism but also some sounds more associated with Ravel and Gershwin, reflecting Rachmaninoff's musical curiosity and evolving style. The Fourth Concerto, with its relatively transparent textures, may resemble the

original version of the First Concerto more than the somewhat gauzier beauty of the Second and Third; but one rarely hears that version of the First Concerto, which is almost always given with the alterations Rachmaninoff made to it in 1917, changes that bring it more in line with the sound of the Second and Third Concertos. In fact, the composer reported that working on the revision of his Concerto No. 1 provided stimulation during the long gestation of the Concerto No. 4.

Rachmaninoff began this piece in 1914, but work was derailed by World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution, which led to the

---

### IN SHORT

**Born:** April 1, 1873, in either Oneg or Semyonovo, Russia

**Died:** March 28, 1943, in Beverly Hills, California

**Work composed:** 1926, completed on August 25 of that year, drawing on material penned in 1914 or even earlier; revised in 1927 and 1941; dedicated to Nikolai Medtner; this performance uses the final edition, from 1941

**World premiere:** in its original form on March 18, 1927, by The Philadelphia Orchestra, Leopold Stokowski, conductor, with the composer as soloist; in its final revised version, on October 12, 1941, by The Philadelphia Orchestra, Eugene Ormandy, conductor, with the composer as soloist

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** April 25, 1954, Dimitri Mitropoulos, conductor, Leonid Hambro, soloist

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** November 21, 2015, Neeme Järvi, conductor, Daniil Trifonov, soloist

**Estimated duration:** ca. 24 minutes

composer's emigration to the United States in 1918. Demands of the concert circuit left him little time to compose, but in 1926 he carved out enough time to finish this concerto in order to honor the date he had already scheduled for its premiere. Taking a break from concertizing, he settled in to work on the piece at his New York apartment at 505 West End Avenue and then took the project along to Europe, where he spent the summer, completing the piece in Dresden on August 25.

The premiere took place the following March 18, in Philadelphia, with Leopold Stokowski conducting The Philadelphia Orchestra and the composer appearing as soloist. It was a critical disaster. In the *New York Evening Telegram*, Pitts Sanborn complained that the piece was "long-winded, tiresome, unimportant, in places tawdry." Rachmaninoff was distraught, and he quickly set about effecting cuts in what admittedly was a long work — so long, in fact, that he had joked to his friend Nikolai Medt-

ner (the work's dedicatee) that a performance of this concerto might be spread over successive nights, like Wagner's *Ring* cycle. He observed in a letter to Medtner:

I also noticed that the theme of the second movement is the theme of the first movement of Schumann's concerto. How is it that you didn't tell me this?

Even before the premiere, Rachmaninoff had begun to edit down his score; soon 114 bars were pared away, and in 1941 another 78, bringing the piece to its final form with a running time of about 25 minutes (22 seconds less than that, in the composer's own recording of it, made that year).

**Instrumentation:** two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.

---

## A True Concerto?

In Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 4, the soloist does not strike the constant "virtuoso pose" that is typical in his Second and Third Concertos. The orchestra is a complete participant in the musical fabric, and Rachmaninoff was uneasy about that. On September 9, 1926, shortly after finishing the piece, he wrote to his friend Nikolai Medtner:

I have already noticed that the orchestra is almost never silent, which I consider a big fault. That means that it is not a piano concerto but a concerto for piano and orchestra.

A similar idea was expressed in the 1932 book *Around Music* by the English composer and pianist Kaikhosru Sorabji, who wrote:

After the splendor and richness [of the Third Concerto], the Fourth Concerto is a stark, rather bare and gaunt work, that comes in style and treatment rather within the domain of the *sinfonia concertante* than the concerto in the proper sense.

*Rachmaninoff leaving his Upper West Side residence, where he began work on his Fourth Piano Concerto*

