

Sergei Rachmaninov - 1873-1943

PIANO CONCERTO no.3 in D minor, Opus 30

Allegro ma non tanto; Intermezzo - Adagio; Finale - Alla breve

Sergei Rachmaninov was born in Semyonovo in Russia on 1 April 1873 to a land-owning, music-loving family. His musical talents were recognized by a cousin and he was sent to the St Petersburg Conservatoire but it was not until he went to the Conservatoire in Moscow, where he studied under Tschaikovsky, Arensky and Taneief, that he began to make his mark as a pianist and composer. In 1897 after the disastrous performance of his first symphony he suffered a bad bout of depression and stopped composing. He started to conduct, mainly operatic works, but in 1900 his depression was cured by hypnosis and he started to compose prolifically again.

In 1909 Rachmaninov was invited on a three-month concert tour of the USA. He was reluctant to go as he thought that apart from its excellent symphony orchestras the USA was an uncultured place but he very much wanted money to buy a car, so he went. He took with him his Third Piano Concerto, which he had completed that summer at his country estate. He practised the solo piano part on board ship using a silent keyboard. The first performance of the concerto took place in November 1909 with the composer as soloist and the New York Symphony Orchestra under Walter Damrosch. The work was variously described as "of great length and extreme difficulties for any but pianists of exceptional technical power", "the dignity and beauty of the music but too long" (N.Y. Daily Tribune) and "the most interesting concert of recent years" (N.Y. Herald). Rachmaninov was himself impressed by the great care that Gustav Mahler took over the preparation of the second performance, which took place in Boston early in 1910. The work has had a resurgence of popularity as the theme music of the film "Shine", made in 1997.

After two bars of throbbing accompaniment the soloist enters with a nostalgic melody that returns in various transformations in all three movements. It is developed and then repeated by the soloist with the whole orchestra. After a quiet bridge passage the second theme is introduced by the orchestra; a gentle staccato figure which is soon turned by the pianist into a flowing lyrical line. Towards the end of the freeform movement there is an elaborate cadenza for the soloist who is briefly joined by solo woodwinds. The movement ends with a short coda which recalls both main themes. The pensive introduction to the Intermezzo leads into the rhapsodic body of the movement which is taken over by the soloist. A livelier section is accompanied by pizzicato strings when the clarinet and bassoon dominate. The soloist goes straight into the Finale with exuberant driving rhythms though the original theme can still be heard. There is a scherzando passage where the pianist develops several episodes accompanied by varied harmonies in the orchestra. The recapitulation increases in volume and intensity and the climax is reached in an expansive version of the first subject. JMR. *Peter Bradley-Fulgoni writes:* Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto represents the peak of the composer's art in the second half of the 1900s. Its clear plan, harmonious form, complete artistic embodiment and its impeccable balance of all the elements make it equal to the second concerto, that was so novel and successful a few years earlier. His genuine and artistic individuality were reflected once again in this work, demonstrating both power and a unique poetic attraction. Rachmaninov's lyricism becomes more profound and restrained, sometimes even rigorous in colour. At the same time dramatic conflicts become more powerful and the symphonic development more tense. Here Rachmaninov's monumental pianistic symphonism is at its apex.