

The Eternal Classic: Rachmaninoff's Piano Concertos

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Abstract

Standing at the end of the line of great Romantic pianist-composers, Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) is undoubtedly a fascinating character and enigma. As a celebrated pianist, composer and conductor, Rachmaninoff's contribution to the evolution of piano literature remains significant throughout the next century. Among all of his piano works, his five piano concertos are the masterworks adored by both performer and audience and still frequently performed nowadays in the concert hall all over the world. These piano concertos are not only a treasure of classical music heritage, but also a brief delineation of the composer's life and music career that includes his success and frustration.

Key words: Rachmaninoff; Piano concerto; Music; Literature

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INTRODUCTION

"Music is enough for a whole lifetime, but a lifetime is not enough for music" – this is a quote from Sergei Rachmaninoff, a legendary Russian composer, pianist, and conductor, who announced his personally perceived life-philosophy dominated by music in such a plain way that no one can doubt his sincere passion of music. Humorously, Rachmaninoff has claimed that he was made "85% musician and 15% man" (Threfall, 1973,

p.5), alluding that he was destined to be a musician who is somehow different from not being a musician. From all above words which directly came from Rachmaninoff's own vocabulary, one can make a confident claim that music is undoubtedly at the center of this composer's passion and occupies a gigantic portion of his lifetime dedication.

As a great pianist-composer in the nineteenth century, Sergei Rachmaninoff appears to be a fascinating enigma these days, perhaps because his multi-talented abilities seem to be incongruous in that particular era wherein specialization was more appreciated. Not too many show the interests on Rachmaninoff's pianistic expertise, despite the fact that he was one of the finest pianists of his generation and his pianistic skills used to be highly venerated in his day (Martyn, 1990, p.508). His renowned large hands that can cover a thirteenth interval are still one of his sparkling labels left to the memory of present-day audiences. Fortunately, some of his recordings which kept his legend of being a pianist alive were well preserved to this new era. With less luckiness, his career as a conductor has passed forgotten into the music history, and most still remain unaware of his conducting prowess. As a matter of fact, the evidence shows that his distinctive artistry expressed itself as successfully in his conducting role as at the keyboard (Martyn, 1990, p.509). While his reputation as a composer came later in the life, Rachmaninoff's compositional equipment has won him a much bigger fame than his other two titles, treasuring his musical thoughts into the immortal literature of classical music.

1. THE RUSSIAN MUSICAL HERITAGE AND INSPIRATION

Representing the late Russian romantic music at the turn of the twentieth century, Rachmaninoff, in his early formative years, was remarkably influenced by three

preeminent Russian composers—Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Mussorgsky. Starting with referencing his predecessors' compositional models, Rachmaninoff eventually shaped a personal musical idiom which involved a heart-touching lyricism, a striking melodic ingenuity, a colorful harmonic palette, and a breadth of expressiveness. He adored and pursued a richly melodious composing style throughout his career, seldom forgetting to make use of his spectacular melodious gift. Rachmaninoff's music philosophy germinated from the Russian spiritual tradition which encourages the artist to "speak the truth from the depth of his heart" (Figes, p.542). Rachmaninoff expounded this musical doctrine in his way – "A composer's music should express the country of his birth, his love affairs, his religion, the books that have influenced him, and the pictures he loves. It should be the sum total of a composer's experience" (Haylock, 1996, p.7). He seems to clarify that music is supposed to be the reflection of a composer's realistic life, which is sublimated to a highly spiritual level to display his/her inner emotional world that is finally conveyed to the audience. Furthermore, music stuffed with living spirits contains an unparalleled magical charisma that is able to intoxicate people's hearts. From what Rachmaninoff has indicated, his music is to be closely related to his life experience which was a double-sided combination of optimism and pessimism.

Being an industriously prolific composer, Rachmaninoff embraced a broad variety of genres, including works for piano, orchestra, singer, and chamber ensemble. As a pianist-composer, it is understandable that Rachmaninoff prized piano a lot more compositional gravity than other instruments. His mature and idiomatic piano-writing receives a big interest from today's audiences. As a professional pianist who was well-known in his day, Rachmaninoff obtains a knowledgeable acquaintance with the piano, for which he has dedicated most of his compositional skills to fully explore the expressive and technical possibilities of the instrument. Plentiful practical experiments had been executed in his early years in order to find out what sonority could be possibly achieved on the keyboard.

2. HIS PIANO CONCERTOS – THE TREASURE OF PIANO LITERATURE

Rachmaninoff's piano concertos firmly stand in the center of his piano output and always evoke audiences' enthusiasm to start an attentive listening or/and engrossing discussions. The composer contributed four piano concertos that were officially titled as "piano concerto", but if one defines the term "piano concerto" as a musical work written for solo piano and orchestra, another piece might be taken into consideration – the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini. Although the title does not suggest its

concerto-like setting, this piece was intentionally written for piano and orchestra, and hence one can reasonably deem it as one of Rachmaninoff's piano concertos, maybe called as the "Fifth Piano Concerto" in my opinion. Every piano concerto has its own distinctive characteristics that distinguish itself from others. They illustrate the composer's historically progressive development spanning from a young student studying in Moscow Conservatory to a real musician hailed by the large musical world.

2.1 Piano Concerto No.1 in B-flat Minor, Op.23

The first completed piano concerto by Rachmaninoff was written in F-sharp minor, dedicated to his cousin Alexander Siloti and published by Gutheil as Op.1. The first movement was finished in 1890, and then he put it aside for a while. In the following year, Rachmaninoff scored the remainder in Ivanovka, where he spent a quiet summer with Siloti whose daily practicing of Edward Grieg's Piano Concerto has considerably impacted on the composer's inspirational resource. In addition to Grieg, two other non-Russian composers – Franz Liszt and Robert Schumann – also showed significant influences on the concerto, for that the composer at the time was constructing his early compositional career and had not yet formed his distinctive musical personality. It takes little effort to perceive that the first concerto has clear echoes to the piano-concerto writings of these three composers, opening alike with the soloist's double octaves cascading downward from the top in triplet quavers. Therefore, "the music's tone of voice" is not consistently his, showing a heavy inclination on his various models (Harrison, p.36). After performing the concerto in public for many times, at least by 1899 Rachmaninoff had become discontented with its "thick orchestra and rather foursquare, chordal piano writing"; in 1908 he decided to start revising the entire concerto, retaining the basic thematic elements and all the charmingly youthful freshness, and getting it published in Russia in 1920 (Norris, 1970, p.110). Even though most of today's audiences are more acquainted with the revised version which was made a quarter of a century later, the original version still well demonstrates the magnificent flair and lyrical instincts of the young Russian composer, who was only seventeen and eighteen years old at the time, prefiguring his potential for grander undertakings.

The differences between the old 1890-91 version and revised 1917 version reveal much about the composer's development during the quarter of the twentieth century (Norris, 1970, p.110). Disliking the textural heaviness, Rachmaninoff pondered revising it by remarkably thinning out the texture of both the orchestral and piano parts, carefully handling every mistake that he can possibly find in the original version. In Geoffrey Norris' words, Rachmaninoff used "the greater knowledge of harmony, orchestration, piano technique and musical form which he had acquired throughout his most prolific period

of composition” (p.111). The work has been transformed from an early immature work into a sophisticated, spiritual, and serious piece that was presumably soon welcome in the concert hall. However, the reality does not always meet what has been subjectively expected. After giving such a scrupulous effort to the revising process, Rachmaninoff did not impress his audiences with the revised First Concerto as deeply as he would have wished. A regretful hint was given him to Alfred Swan about this unfavorable public indifference:

I have rewritten my First Concerto; it is really good now. All the youthful freshness is there, and yet it plays itself so much more easily. And nobody pays any attention. When I tell them in America that I will play the First Concerto, they do no protest, but I can see by their faces that they would prefer the Second or Third (Norris, 1970, p.111).

Although Rachmaninoff failed to amaze his audiences, the First Piano Concerto is still a spectacular achievement for a seventeen-year-old composer whose musical personality and characteristic seals started to shape and eventually emancipate from his heavy dependence on models in the early years.

2.2 Piano Concerto No.2 in C Minor, Op.18

In Geoffrey Norris’ opinion, the most likely reason why the public showed such an apathetic manner to his efforts in the first concerto is because their ears have already been captured by his Second and Third Concertos, which came out before his revised first concerto in 1917 (p.107). The impetuously youthful vivacity of the first concerto does not find its place in the next two concertos, replaced by the sensuous beauty and somber wistfulness. The point can be effortlessly testified by looking at the opening of three concertos. No.1 has a flamboyant beginning which echoes its models, starting with a declamatory flourish of double octaves and chords on the piano. This kind of ambitious opening, however, did not take place in the next two concertos. No.2 uncovers the veil with eight slowly tolling bell-like chords on the piano imbued with dark breadth, and No.3 has led piano straight to the theme after two orchestral bars introducing a “germinal rhythmic figure”. Three concertos are all different from each other and reveal their distinctive individuality of character from the very beginning. The Second and Third are much more advanced and thoughtful both structurally and musically, stamped with the composer’s ripe musical idiom and peculiar characters which were fostered during his exploration of the First Concerto. This can be also treated as a major reason of audiences’ indifference toward the revised First Concerto, which for sure greatly disappointed the composer.

However, it was the First Symphony which brought the composer a miserably depressing period because of its catastrophic failure. After undergoing all kinds of psychological affliction, Rachmaninoff restored some

of his self-confidence by retrieving success from his Second Piano Concerto. Notable for its conciseness and breathtaking beauty of lyricism, the Second Concerto in C minor rewarded the composer an outstanding success and established his international reputation as a concerto composer. Reportedly, Rachmaninoff completed the second and third movements quickly and easily, but was troubled in the first movement that he turned out to premiere the work in its incomplete form in December 1900 under Siloti’s persuasion (Martyn, 1990, p.125). Then in the following year after the first movement had been put on paper, Rachmaninoff gave the world premier of his Second Piano Concerto in its complete form at a Moscow Philharmonic Society concerto with Siloti conducting (Harrison, p.92). Soon after, its popularity had inevitably spread out in the larger musical world and was frequently heard in the concert halls. Interestingly, when he wrote the C minor concerto, Rachmaninoff yielded an abundance of thematic materials more than he needed, confessing to Riesemann that “the material grew in bulk, and new musical ideas began to stir within me – far more than I needed for my concerto” (Ibid.). As a consequence to avoid waste, he turned to another piece – Suite No. 2 for two pianos which were composed simultaneously with the Second Piano Concerto. Thereby, it is reasonable that both pieces have shared some musical idioms and family likeness.

In general, the Second Concerto reveals Rachmaninoff’s gifted instinct of melody and an irresistible aspire of lyricism in a striking manner, leading to be quoted by a big number of songwriters. As discussed earlier, the first movement has an unprecedented opening which contains “a sequence of swelling piano chords in F minor punctuated by bass octaves” (Martyn, 1990, p.110). His writing for the left hand demands a remarkable stretch which has challenged some pianists who are equipped with small hands. After a sequence of bell-like chords, piano launches forty-five measures of long-phrased ascending arpeggios in an improvisatory manner, with the orchestra bringing out a melancholic first theme, which is unexpectedly not to be played by the keyboard. Considering this is a concerto, it is intriguing for the piano to stay in an accompanimental role for such a long time, and it must be unfamiliar to almost all Rachmaninoff’s contemporaries (Harrison). Furthermore, Nikolai Medtner, a Russian pianist-composer, commented on the profound Russian quality of the opening:

The theme of inspired Second Concerto is not only the theme of his life but always conveys the impression of being one of the most strikingly Russian of themes, and only because the soul of this theme is Russian; there is no ethnographic trimming here, no dressing up, no decking out in national dress, no folksong intonation, and yet every time, from the first bell stroke, you feel the figure of Russia rising up to her full height. (Martyn, 1990, p.127)

Contrasting to the somber main theme, the second subject of the first movement is a wistful, dignified,

and chant-like melody which does not aim for virtuosic display but for a heartfelt passion. It changes its outfit and reappears in the first strain of the main theme in the second movement. The opening of the third movement also contains fragmentary hints of the beginning motive of the first movement, both harmonically and melodically. Such a built-in inter-movement cohesion gives the concerto a concisely taut formal structure. Furthermore, Rachmaninoff mastered his contrapuntal skills in the finale, where a *fugato* passage enthusiastically takes place in the piano and orchestral parts that receive equal importance. Overlooking the entire concerto, one can find out that the soloist is rarely heard without the orchestra, a point over which “Taneyev felt it perhaps merited criticism” (Martyn, 1990, p.110). Despite all the critical comments, the Second Piano Concerto is unquestionably an outstanding success of Rachmaninoff and invaluable contribution to the piano repertoire. Oskar Riesemann corroborates that within the last thirty years almost every well-known pianist included this concerto in his/her performing repertoire, and it has unexceptionally been on the Symphony Concert programmes of the world (p.223). The concerto, on the other hand, not only prized the composer a worldwide reputation, but also helped him to recapture his self-confidence that he had lost after being afflicted in the earlier years of depression. The triumphantly flourishing ending of the concerto in a sense demonstrates his confident declaration of how far he had left his disheartenment.

2.3 Piano Concerto No.3 in D Minor, Op.30

The Third Piano Concerto seems to have some sort of intimacy to the Second, for audiences' favor to unconsciously relate them together. It is one of Rachmaninoff's completed large-scale masterpieces, written in Ivanovka, the composer's country family estate in Russia, finished in September 1909, and graciously noted by esteemed American musicologist Joseph Kerman as “a work of real distinction” (Haylock, 1996). Some critiques point out that this Concerto has too much close resemblance to the second (Norris, 1976). Indeed, there are some discernible elements shared by both concertos. For example, they have the same interest to use the tonic note as an axis around which all other thematic materials are knitted together. In the Third Concerto, Rachmaninoff reused the proven style and form of the Second which efficiently raise audiences' interest. Compared with his previous two concertos, the Third shows greater sophisticated maturity in terms of its finer architectural structure and more subtle musical establishment, with like inventive freshness and charm. It reveals an abundance of previously unknown features and new technical conquests to be considered by some historians as the beginning of the new “third period” of the composer's life (Riesemann, 1934, p.233). The Third concerto allows Rachmaninoff to solve many of the problems he had experienced in the

first two concertos, immensely developing the possibility of expressiveness and virtuosity, and pushing the characteristic features of its predecessor to the very limits (Martyn, 1990). Consequently, it can be said that none of Rachmaninoff's previous works can really surpass the power of the Third Piano Concerto, which also forms a victory landmark in the composer's career.

The layout of the opening declares this new work is to be extraordinarily different to its predecessor which loves to start with a chordal introduction on the piano before the orchestra brings in the theme. Instead, it opens with two bars for orchestra alone, introducing the dotted rhythmic motto that unifies the motional gesture of the entire piece; then the piano enters with the theme in a simple manner playing an octave apart, accompanied quietly by the orchestra. The fact is that one can hardly look at this milestone concerto without occasionally recalling its predecessor to make a comparison, especially the Second which was suspected as the model of the Third. Concerning the opening of the Second Concerto which first launches from the piano with a gloomy and dramatic chordal sequence, the simplicity of the beginning texture of the Third poses a remarkable contrast.

The opening theme is gentle, noble, and chant-like, filled with tremendous expressive power. On Martyn's point of view, it has obvious references to the religious motif of the first movement of Rachmaninoff's First Piano Sonata and of Marco's leitmotif in *monna Vanna* (p.209). But interestingly, the composer did not acknowledge the “possible ecclesiastical origin” of the theme when he was interviewed by the American musicologist Josef Yasser in 1935:

The theme is borrowed neither from folk song forms nor from church sources. It simply wrote itself... If I had any plan in composing this theme, I was thinking only of sound. I wanted “to sing” the melody on the piano as a singer would sing it, and to find a suitable orchestral accompaniment or one that would not muffle this “singing”. That is all! (Martyn, 1990, p.209)

Throughout the concerto, there is a remarkable effort striving towards the thematic unity which glues every scattered idea together as a whole. The opening thematic clues reappear in transformation in the latter two movements, creating a spontaneously coherent inter-movement correlation. Besides, piano and orchestra fuse into one entity which also benefits its structural organization. The last movement contains a climax which makes it one of the most exciting finales in the concerto repertoire (Haylock, 1996, p.44). As in the Second Concerto, Rachmaninoff barely forgot to take a great advantage of his considerable gift for writing beautifully shaped melodies that are imbued with heart-touching lyricism, which on the other hand mirrors his response to his personal life on a spiritual level. Rachmaninoff intelligently uses his materials in such a way that all

three movements are naturally integrated and unified as a whole, since they share interest on the same thematic motif and are molded within one sphere of rich emotional varieties (Norris, 1976).

Because of its unbelievably extensive demands, the Third concerto has intimidated many pianists. Josef Hofmann, to whom this piece was dedicated, was a renowned artist and celebrated piano virtuoso but never happened to perform it in public, because his small hands would have found the difficulty to cope with “the massive figurations of the piano layout” (Martyn, 1990, p.216). Of course Hofmann did not frankly profess his real misgiving, instead he gave a critical judgment about the concerto’s structure saying “a short melody which is constantly interrupted with difficult passages; more a *fantasie* than a concerto. Not enough form” (p.216). Therefore, one can infer that this concerto did not earn its deserved popularity at the beginning of its life. Over the next Thirty years, Rachmaninoff frequently played the Third Concerto in Russia and abroad, but it was not until the advent of Vladimir Horowitz, who exhibited this piece on the international stage and captured a worldwide crowd of audiences (p.217). Nowadays, the Third Piano Concerto by Rachmaninoff is not only fanatically welcomed in concerto programs, but is frequently called for by many competitions as a standardized ruler to measure contestants’ capabilities. In addition to its imperative request for an exquisite musical sensitivity, the technical aspect of this concerto is also extremely challenging to most pianists, and one can hardly accomplish the feats of musicality before removing all the technical hindrances first. Because of its unparalleled combination of lyricism and virtuosic excitement, many pianists have considered this piece as a milestone of challenge in their career that they all exert themselves to stride over.

2.4 Piano Concerto No.4 in G Minor, Op.40

The tremendous success of the Third Piano Concerto also created a problem for the composer himself, because he had reached a high point beyond which he could hardly go further. There exists a period of over twenty years dividing the Third from the Fourth Concerto. Rachmaninoff’s Fourth Piano Concerto in G minor, Op.40, was finished in August 1926, dedicated to Medtner, and premiered in Philadelphia on 18 March 1927 (Martyn, 1990, p.299). Four days later its New York premiere had left the critics a negative impression, described as “a combination of sentimentality, monotony, loose structure, lack of originality, and overlength” (Haylock, 1996, p.67). Indeed, the Fourth Concerto barely shows any noticeable progress compared with the Third which has been exalted to such a high altitude that many other works are under its shadow. But in another respect, it also discloses a quality which shows some novel elements about the composer, such as an expressional tranquility and an occasional

spark of humor. Robert Threlfall thinks that the concerto has endlessly fascinating patterns of the solo part wherein every note can be clearly heard, and hence “deserve at least the occasional attention of pianists and their audiences in search of a work a little off the beaten track” (p.52).

Concerned about its length which turned out to be a popular topic for critics, Rachmaninoff had been busy omitting various passages in every movement, especially in the fourth wherein he cut more than forty measures in the revised version (Norris, 1976). Consequently, the new version of the Fourth Piano Concerto has a very compact formal structure, containing remarkably shorter movements than the Third Concerto, but it had lost some of its original sense of fluency. However, paradoxically, the efforts and attempts that Rachmaninoff made to improve the Fourth Piano Concerto did not well pay off and still remains unloved at present. In his revising process, the composer aimed specifically at improving its formal structure instead of producing more chances for it to be universally accepted. Partially this unpleasant result can be also attributed to his unprecedented success of the previous two concertos which considerably pressures the Fourth one that it can hardly exceed its expression of melancholy and the element of gladiatorial combat between soloist and orchestra” that were successfully developed in the Second and Third (p.304). Furthermore, it also temporarily deserted the effortless coherence which appears in its predecessor and Rachmaninoff’s pride-worthy melodic gift. Its short-breathed thematic ideas are in the antithesis to the impassioned sweeping melodies and are incapable to render a climactic excitement in the finale. Of course all the criticisms deeply hurt the composer, although he had been trying to be brave to face the reality. At this point, his “old emotional wounds” from the failure of his First Symphony were opened up to a certain degree (Haylock, 1996, p.68).

2.5 The “Fifth” Piano Concerto

The last so-called concerto is the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini which is also the last concerted piece of Rachmaninoff written in 1934. The original title is “Symphonic Variations on a Theme of Paganini,” but soon Rachmaninoff modified it to “Fantasia for piano and orchestra in the form of variations on a theme of Paganini,” but he finally ended up with calling it “Rhapsody” (Martyn, 1990). The theme he uses is based on Paganini’s famous Caprice in A minor for solo violin. The infinite flexibility of this Paganini theme gives the composer a spacious capacity to exert their inventiveness, and thereby it becomes a good variation material which had allured many composers, even before Rachmaninoff, to reconstruct it into variation sets, most notably Liszt and Brahms. Despite its self-contained outfit, this piece apparently corresponds to the conventional form of a sonata or concerto – fast, slow, fast. Martyn suggests

that it can be divided as following: Opening movement, Variations 1-10; Slow movement, Variations 12-18; Last movement, Variations 19-24 (p.328).

According to Martyn, in 1937, three years after the Paganini Rhapsody, Rachmaninoff came to the view that this piece could be used for a ballet based on the nineteenth century legend of historical Paganini, who had traded his soul to the devil to acquire such a marvelous technique (p.325). Consequently he requested Fokine for a ballet scenario. Interestingly enough, Rachmaninoff came up with the ideas of the music's programmatic content after the piece was composed. The music itself also contains quality that well accords with the figure of Paganini, who is half humane and half devilish. In addition to the well-known Paganini theme which predominantly emerges at the very beginning and is highly familiarized by our ears, another thematic idea that is not introduced until much later but still plays a significant role throughout the piece is the tune of Dies irae, which perhaps symbolizes the evil side of Paganini's personality. It is in Variation 7 where the piano for the first time announces the ominous Dies irae theme in ponderous chords, interweaving with the orchestral statement of the Paganini theme played in a contrasting *leggiero* character. The Dies irae theme underpins the entire work and is often interwoven with the Paganini theme as an integration that possibly suggests Paganini's dual personality with two contradictory sides of characters, even though Rachmaninoff did not intend to offer this programmatic reference when he wrote the piece. Another ingenious invention lies in Variation 18, where Rachmaninoff turned the original theme upside down to make a glorious breathtaking tune, which often misleads the audiences to think it merely another inimitable melody of the composer. Rachmaninoff's melodic gift, again, is beautifully displayed, in which its exquisite lyricism overshadows the technical demand, and his architectural skills are rarely exemplified more fully than in his logical organization of the 24 variations (Norris, 1976).

So far, the evidences have shown that the Rhapsody wins an outstanding popularity from international audiences. But still, anything in the world has two opposite poles, one pleasant and one unpleasant. Bernard Holland, a critic of New York Times, focused his lament on the Paganini Rhapsody: "Every bar, I must admit,

increased my depression, not just for the shallowness of the musical experience, but for the cynical use of ubiquitous music to placate lazy ears" (Holland, 1997). His distemper and discontent on this hailed piece, unfortunately, were taken by most as a jaded New York critic which was valueless. Public insist on their belief that the Rhapsody is Rachmaninoff's finest work (Haylock, 1996, p.77). Its tautly coherent structure, vigorous ingenuity and innocent spontaneity also prove that it deserves the admiration of audiences, and of musicians.

CONCLUSION

Four Piano Concertos plus the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini take a dominant role in Rachmaninoff's musical output, continuing to play to full houses in the concert hall. The sentimentally passionate cells ingrained in every note, every gesture, and every breath, make his music remarkably heart-touching, bringing out innermost tear and joy to the listener. Rachmaninoff, as a pianist, conductor, and composer, has achieved an unrivalled mastery in the practice of art. His name is printed not only in the music history, human history, but also in the civilization of the world. Music is to continue, and no one with common sense is likely to argue. So long as the history survives and the human civilization continues, so long will Rachmaninoff's name be honored. Generation after generation, people would still sweep tears or laugh with pleasure while listening to his music. His musical heritage permeated with his own vigorous spirit will keep glittering in the tradition of classical music for ever.

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