

## Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor, op. 30—Sergei Rachmaninoff

Like J. S. Bach, who upon his death was looked upon as a more or less old fuddy-duddy (now we know better, of course), Rachmaninoff has borne his share of criticism for having composed in a hopelessly old-fashioned style, long after its relevance. His compositions are the last major representatives of vivid Russian Romanticism—long after that style was presumed dead and buried. Yet, like Bach, his musical genius, his talent, and his strong belief in the validity of his art led him to create a legacy that took “old-fashioned-style” to a natural and valid high point of achievement. While a child of the nineteenth century, he died almost at the midpoint of the twentieth, secure in his success, and secure in the world’s enduring appreciation of his “dated” style.

Rachmaninoff wrote four piano concertos, the first was a student composition (later revised) from 1896, and the last was composed in 1926 (revised in 1941). The third concerto was completed in the fall of 1909, the composer having written it in the peace and quiet of his wife’s country estate in Russia. By that time, Rachmaninoff was an international celebrity, with an impressive list of significant and popular compositions under his belt. As one of the world’s recognized virtuosos of the piano, he wrote his piano concertos primarily for himself, and envisioned the third as a centerpiece of his upcoming first American tour. Accordingly, the première took place in New York City in November of 1909; a second performance followed a couple of months later, with the New York Philharmonic, conducted by Gustav Mahler.

The work has always been considered a difficult one, but so are all of his concertos. What is of interest is that, for all the power, grandeur, and virtuosity required in the concerto, it starts almost contemplatively, with a simple, but unmistakably melancholic, theme. To open a big Russian concerto in such a modest, and unassuming fashion was a shrewd move on the composer’s part; it’s an imaginative way to toy with the audience and allow for ample expansion of the idea as the movement progresses. The piano soon gives up the theme to the orchestra and goes on to a veritable cascade of rapid figurations. Soon, a lush modulation leads to a happier key, introduced by a brief little march-like figure, and the second theme elegantly glides in. The development starts almost literally like the beginning, and Rachmaninoff works his way through the material as only he can do. Virtuoso writing for the soloist takes us through one big climax after another, literally rocking the piano with technical demands. Finally, an impressive cadenza tops out the storm, and raises the ante even further. The cadenza’s import more or less takes the place of an extended recapitulation. You do hear the opening material one more time, almost as an allusion to a recap, but it’s brief, and before you know it, the movement ends quietly with a soft scamper, so typical of the composer.

The second movement begins with a substantial introduction for the orchestra, alternatively featuring purely string sound and rich wind choir scoring. Eventually, the piano enters with a flourish, and then settles down for the luxurious Rachmaninoff melody. But, eventually, in true fashion, the composer cannot restrain himself, and impassioned figurations and climaxes sound as if we’re in one of the bookend fast movements—so typical of Rachmaninoff! It’s as if there’s a scherzo in the middle, but it’s a creative touch, and brings some useful contrast to an intense slow movement. Eventually things settle down again, and we hear familiar pensive textures and melodic ideas from the opening. And then, without warning, some demonstrative drum-like figures in the piano lead right into the brisk last movement.

It’s a sparkling affair, and is the beginning is redolent of the inimitable heritage of Rachmaninoff’s Russian predecessor, Rimsky-Korsakov. Variation follows variation in this exploration of a seemingly infinite display of almost every kind of virtuoso figuration a pianist can dash off. Here, as in so much of this concerto, one can from time to time also sense the shadow of another great predecessor—the incomparable Franz Liszt. In this movement as well, we experience the familiar—and necessary, too—quiet moments of respite from the relentless energy of the drive forward. Ever the craftsman, Rachmaninoff makes use of material from earlier movements—sometimes almost hidden, sometimes more evident. As is almost always the case with our composer, the driving web of figurations finally flows into the moment that everyone is waiting for: the soaring reappearance of the “big Rachmaninoff tune.” It’s a perfect cap for a beloved work couched in rich, lush textures, and of almost unparalleled melodic sweep, the lyricism of which seems to unfold in growing cascades of sound.