

# Concerto No. 2 in C minor for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 18

Hyejin Kim - Piano

Moderato  
Adagio Sostenuto  
Allegro Scherzando

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Sergei Rachmaninoff  
Born 1873  
Died 1943

“Rachmaninoff’s immortalizing totality was his scowl. He was a six-and-a-half-foot-tall scowl! he was an awesome man.”  
— Igor Stravinsky

Brilliant composer, virtuoso pianist and demanding conductor Sergei Vsilyevich Rachmaninoff was born in 1873 on an estate near Novgorod, Russia. He began studying the piano at age four. The family was very wealthy, but his father, an amateur pianist, was completely inept at taking care of the family finances. By the time Rachmaninoff turned nine, his father had squandered his entire fortune, and the family had to leave the estate.

Rachmaninoff then entered the Conservatory in St. Petersburg as a scholarship student. But he wasn’t very serious about his studies. He often skipped classes to take in the sights of the great city, and spend time at the skating rink. His grandmother took him to church services, where he was mesmerized by the sound of the choir and the bells. But his teachers didn’t think he and music would have any close relationship to speak of. Later on, however, when he began studies at the Moscow Conservatory, he became very dedicated to music, discovering new outlets of creative expression in both his piano playing and in composition.

It was at Moscow that Rachmaninoff lived at the home of his teacher, the great Nicolai Zverev. Zverev closely supervised every aspect of Rachmaninoff’s study habits, and saw to it that he meet and perform for many preeminent figures of Russia. Among these was Tchaikovsky, who became Rachmaninoff’s idea of musical perfection. This new spirit of enthusiasm allowed Rachmaninoff to graduate early and win the Great Golden Medal in piano. As a player, Rachmaninoff was famous for his precision, rhythmic drive, legato and clarity of texture. He was a true performer. The next year he would graduate in composition, and win the Great Gold Medal for his opera, *Aleko*. Things were going well.

*Aleko* premiered at the Bolshoi in spring 1893, catching the attention of Tchaikovsky himself. In fact, Tchaikovsky was planning to conduct Rachmaninoff’s symphonic poem *Utyos* (*The Rock*, op. 7) during the upcoming season, to help advance the career of the young composer who, it turns out, would extend Tchaikovsky’s own legacy well into the new century. Sadly, Tchaikovsky died in November 1893 so those plans were never carried out. Through much of 1895, Rachmaninoff worked on his first truly major work, the *Symphony No. 1*. It received its premiere on March 27, 1897 under the baton of Alexander Glazunov, and was a disaster. According to certain reports, Glazunov was drunk for the performance. Whatever the reason for

the fiasco, it sent Rachmaninoff into a three-year crisis of self-doubt during which he wrote next to nothing. Rachmaninoff said, "I did nothing and found no pleasure in anything."

Then in 1900, with the pressure of an impending commissioned concerto ahead of him, Rachmaninoff finally heeded the advice of his family and friends and visited a psychiatrist named Dr. Dahl, a specialist in the new science of hypnosis, to help him snap out of his prolonged bout with depression. Rachmaninoff said that in his many sessions he would "lay half asleep" while Dahl would put suggestions into his mind about his ability to write this concerto. Although it sounds quite remarkable, Rachmaninoff said Dahl's methods cured him. "Already at the beginning of the summer" he said, "I began again to compose. The material grew in bulk, and new musical ideas began to stir within me." By the autumn, I had finished two movements of the concerto. "The piece he had written was the work we will hear the MSO perform this evening" the *Concerto No. 2 for Piano and Orchestra*. It was an instant success, sending Rachmaninoff into a flurry of professional activity. The music was "gratefully dedicated to Monsieur N. Dahl."

After several years, Rachmaninoff began to wander - Italy, Germany, Paris. Being a master pianist himself, he knew exactly how to make intricate passagework come alive for his listeners. He had learned well from his idol, Tchaikovsky, as many of his tunes were full of Russian melancholy.

Because he toured extensively, Rachmaninoff didn't compose prolifically, but the body of work he did create was filled with stunning beauty. Besides *the Piano Concerto No. 2*, he wrote other mature works such as the *Preludes, Op. 23*, and the *Prelude in G minor, Op. 23, No. 5*, which Fritz Kriesler transcribed for violin and piano.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, Rachmaninoff's reputation as both composer and pianist grew. In 1902, he married the love of his life. This was a bit complicated, because she, Natalia Satina, was his first cousin. It was against the law for them to marry in the Russian Orthodox Church, so the couple had to find a priest who would perform the wedding at an army chapel in Moscow.

In 1909, he was persuaded to visit the US on a concert tour, for which he wrote his monumental *Piano Concerto No. 3*. He disliked touring, however, and declined offers to stay on as conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra or to follow up this overseas tour with others. Instead, he devoted himself again to composing. In the summer of 1911, he wrote a set of nine *Etudes-tableaux, Op. 33*, which he performed on a British tour that fall. Rachmaninoff, exhausted from performing all over Europe during the 1912/13 season, resolved to spend the summer of 1913 in Rome composing.

Although Rachmaninoff lived until 1943, the *Corelli Variations*, written in 1931 would be the last original solo piano piece he would write. He composed only three works, all orchestral (*Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, op. 43; Symphony no. 3, op. 44; and Symphonic Dances, op. 45*) during his final decade.

Rachmaninoff almost literally killed himself touring, even though he had already decided that the 1942/43 season would be his last as a public performer. On tour in the US, he was clearly ailing through the early weeks of 1943, although he was determined to carry on. After his last concert on February 17<sup>th</sup> in Knoxville, Tennessee, he had to return home to Beverly Hills, California. Sadly, he only lived until the end of March of that year.

Rachmaninoff's *Concerto No. 2 for Piano*, penned in 1900-09 is the most celebrated romantic work of its type written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The delicious harmonies and heavenly melodies served as example for budding composers in Russia and the US to study and emulate.

The work, which also features a mighty dose of pianistic fireworks, is one of the most performed and recorded pieces in the concerto literature.

The *Concerto* was performed for the first time on October 14, 1901 by the Moscow Philharmonic Society, with the composer at the piano. When the great Rachmaninoff approached the piano with his slow gait and stoic expression, he put forth an aura of aloof mystery, which tended to put off the audiences. However, when he sat at the keyboard, and raised his very large hands (apparently he could span an interval of a thirteenth) to play, he was about as intimidating as a newborn kitten. Rachmaninoff drew from the piano the warmest and most beautiful tone one could imagine. In addition, his technical ability made the virtuosic passagework appear easy. Most pianists, especially those with smaller hands, will tell you his music is far from easy to play.

The first movement (*Moderato*) opens with chords in the piano which lead into the first theme: a thoroughly Russian melody adorned with lacy fingerwork by the soloist. After a very broad presentation of this first theme, the piano takes center stage to play the lyrical second theme. This is without fail one of Rachmaninoff's most popular melodies. The development is then broken down among the sections of the orchestra, and surrounded by decorative passages in the piano. Towards the end of the development, the piano introduces a march-ish figure that carries into the somewhat varied recap section.

After a chromatic intro, the piano begins the second movement (*Adagio sostenuto*) with a triplet figure that continues under the main theme in the flute and clarinet. The piano and the orchestra switch back and forth between the theme and the triplet figure. Later a sweeping phrase on the piano leads into a more lively section carried by the woodwinds and the strings. Then there is the brilliant cadenza, and the last appearance of the theme.

The final movement (*Allegro scherzando*) begins with extremely spare orchestration. But we pick up instruments in rapid succession, and a short, fortissimo passage ushers in the strong mood of the movement. The soloist starts out with a cadenza, and is joined by the woodwinds and strings, which closely adhere to the solo line. The first theme is introduced by the soloist and immediately developed. A brief passage by the soloist leads into the second theme, which is played by violas and oboe. The development section gives us new material, a dotted figure, and both themes return, with even more elaboration. After a brief cadenza, the second theme comes back, but this time it means it. The entire orchestra speaks in double forte, and a dazzling coda ends the finale.