

Sergei Rachmaninoff

(1873–1943)

Sergei Vassilyevich Rachmaninoff was the fifth child of a Russian aristocratic family. His mother, father, and grandfather played the piano, so it is no wonder that he showed considerable musical talent at a young age. When Rachmaninoff was nine, his parents separated. The family estate was sold and he moved with his mother, brothers, and sisters to St. Petersburg, Russia. Rachmaninoff was ten when he was enrolled in the St. Petersburg Conservatory. There he studied piano and harmony. Upon turning 12, he entered the Moscow Conservatory, where he lived in his teacher's home, sharing a bedroom with three other students and taking turns practicing his required three hours of piano daily. He studied at the Moscow Conservatory (1885–92) under Nikolay Zverev, with his cousin Alexander Siloti for piano, and with Taneyev and Anton Arensky for composition, graduating with distinction as both a pianist and a composer. His opera *Aleko*, given at the Bol'shoy in 1893, was his diploma piece. At the Moscow Conservatory, he also met fellow student Alexander Scriabin. During this time, he met many prominent musicians at Zverev's Sunday afternoon gatherings, including Anton Rubinstein and Peter Tchaikovsky. Tchaikovsky attended the rehearsal for *Aleko*, recognized Rachmaninoff's talent, and encouraged him considerably.

Rachmaninoff graduated as a pianist in 1892. He won a gold medal for his opera *Aleko* and soon completed his first Piano Concerto in F# minor. He also wrote a group of Five Pieces, Op. 3, for piano, which included his famous piano work Prelude in C# minor. Soon he began appearing in concert as a pianist and also took up conducting. While composing, he also taught piano students and served as an accompanist. When his First Symphony was first performed March 27, 1897, it was met with a great deal of criticism. Rachmaninoff lost confidence in himself as a composer and saw a psychologist to undergo hypnosis to help gain back his self-esteem. Soon, a wealthy friend offered the position of conductor in a Moscow opera house that Rachmaninoff accepted. This stint as a conductor helped him greatly in gaining back his self-confidence. The Philharmonic Society in London, England, extended the opportunity for Rachmaninoff to appear as a guest composer, pianist, and conductor. He was so successful that he was invited back for the 1899–90 season.

By this time, and most particularly in Piano Concerto No. 2, the essentials of his art had been assembled: the command of the emotional gesture conceived as lyrical melody extended from small motifs, the concealment behind these motifs of subtleties in orchestration and structure, the broad sweep of his lines and forms, the predominant melancholy and nostalgia, and the loyalty to the finer Russian Romanticism inherited from Tchaikovsky and his teachers. These things were not to change, and during the remaining years leading to the Revolution, they provided him with the material for a sizable output of operas, liturgical music, orchestral works, piano pieces, and songs. In 1909 he made his first American tour as a pianist, for which he wrote Piano Concerto No. 3.

Soon after the October Revolution, he left Russia with his family for Scandinavia; in 1918 they arrived in New York, where he mainly lived thereafter, though he spent periods in Paris, Dresden, and Switzerland. During this period, he was active as a pianist on both sides of the Atlantic (though never again in Russia). He gave his last recital in Knoxville, Tennessee, February 15, 1943, and died March 28, 1943. As a pianist he was famous for his sharp rhythmic drive, legato and clarity of texture, powerful left hand, and the precision, accuracy, and deftness of his piano technique.

Preface

Before records and radio, piano transcriptions, such as those made by Rachmaninoff, were an important source of music. In the hands of Rachmaninoff, the piano convincingly took on the might of an orchestral score. The results were often fiendishly difficult to play. One of the fascinations of transcriptions is the degree to which the composer leaves his own mark, rather than simply arranging a piece for piano. Some of Rachmaninoff's finest transcriptions feature the light-fingered wizardry of Mendelssohn's Scherzo from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; his gift to his adopted country, "The Star-Spangled Banner"; Fritz Kreisler's famous "Liebesfreud"; and his own original composition, the bright "Italian Polka" scored for one piano, four hands and trumpet solo.

Rachmaninoff wrote "Italian Polka" after a family holiday in Italy in 1906. While traveling there, he met a street musician singing a Neapolitan song, a song that later inspired the theme for this charming composition.

ITALIAN POLKA

(1906)

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF
Edited by GAIL LEW

[Giacoso (♩ = ca. 120-124)]

Primo

Secondo

5

mf

dim.

5

mf

dim.

*Fingering and pedaling is editorial.

**Staccato on count 2 is editorial.