

Concerto No. 3 in D Minor for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 30, Sergei Rachmaninov

(Born Oneg, 1873; died Beverly Hills, California, 1943)

Rachmaninov was the last of the great Russian Romantic composers. Born into a musical and well-to-do (though soon to be impoverished) family in Oneg, in northwestern Russia, he studied at the St. Petersburg and Moscow Conservatories, winning at age nineteen the latter's gold medal in composition. The disastrous premiere of his First Symphony in 1897 (the conductor may have been drunk) drove him into a three-year depression that could be overcome only with the help of a psychiatrist. Once recovered, and buoyed by the success of his Second Piano Concerto (1900–1901), he maintained a busy international performing schedule (including a 1909 tour of the United States), retiring to the family estate in Ivanovka in the summers to compose. Events leading up to the October Revolution forced Rachmaninov and his family to flee Russia, first to Sweden and eventually to Switzerland and the United States. He died of melanoma in Beverly Hills, California, on 1 February 1943. He and his wife had become U.S. citizens about two months prior.

Although Rachmaninov lived well into the twentieth century, as a composer he was considered old-fashioned in an era that prized modernism. While Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Ives, Webern, and other “moderns” were inventing new sounds, Rachmaninov was content with the lush musical palette of Tchaikovsky. The 1954 edition of the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* described him this way:

As a pianist Rachmaninov was one of the finest artists of his time; as a composer he can hardly be said to have belonged to his time at all...His music is well constructed and effective, but monotonous in texture, which consists in essence mainly of artificial and gushing tunes accompanied by a variety of figures derived from arpeggios. The enormous popular success some few of Rachmaninov's works had in his lifetime is not likely to last, and musicians never regarded it with much favor.

Rachmaninov countered his critics with the claim that much modern music is a sham. Too often young composers “plunge into the writing of experimental music with their school lessons only half learned.”

Rachmaninov composed his Third Piano Concerto during the summer of 1909, in preparation for an upcoming American tour. (His reasons for agreeing to the tour were largely financial; he hoped to earn enough money to buy a car.) He didn't allow himself time to learn the solo part before leaving Russia, so he took along a dumb piano keyboard for silent practicing in transit.

The work has three movements. The first, *Allegro ma non troppo* (D minor), begins with a simple melody that was suspected of having been inspired by a Russian hymn (though Rachmaninov denied it). As is typical for Rachmaninov, there is much in the way of complex figuration and powerful chords. The *Intermezzo: Adagio* (F-sharp minor/D-flat major) consists of variations on a lush, Romantic melody. In a sprightly interlude, the bassoon and clarinet recall the first movement's principal theme. The quick and vigorous *Finale: Alla breve* (D minor/D major), which begins without pause, includes variations on themes used in the first movement.

Rachmaninov composed two cadenzas for the first movement. The original is longer and has a broadly chordal opening section. The second is shorter and lighter. Rachmaninov routinely used the shorter version, and other pianists followed suit. In 1958, the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition established the original cadenza as the standard.

A note on Rachmaninov as a recording artist: Rachmaninov was the first major composer-performer to have the opportunity to record large quantities of his own music. His first recordings were piano rolls of his own Second Piano Concerto, made in 1918 for a German firm and probably never issued to the public. In 1919, newly arrived in the United States and in need of money, he produced a series of recordings on Edison “Diamond Discs,” a new technology at the time that provided somewhat better sound quality than cylinders. When the Edison Company, in contradiction of Rachmaninov's wishes, allowed

multiple takes of his performances to circulate, he signed a contract with the Victor Talking Machine Company (absorbed by RCA in 1929), thus beginning a fruitful 23-year collaboration with that organization. He also recorded several piano rolls for the American Piano Company. His work as a recording artist involved collaborations with some of the preeminent figures of the day, including his favorites Leopold Stokowski and Eugene Ormandy of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Still, Ben Johansen

Ben Johansen teaches acoustic and electroacoustic music composition as well as music technology at Baylor University. His creative areas of focus include computer programming for interactive electroacoustic music (Max, JavaScript), physical computing (Arduino), improvisation/indeterminacy, being a composer-performer, and the intersection of art and Christianity.

Ben completed his Bachelor's in Music Education and Master's in Music Composition at Baylor and earned his PhD in Music with an emphasis in Composition, a Specialization in Computer Media, and a Minor in Installation Art from the University of North Texas.

Miguel Harth-Bedoya asked Ben to write *Still* for this Waco Symphony concert. Ben has dedicated this work to his wife, Heather. *Still* is for full orchestra and interactive electronics. (Max by Cyling '74 is the software used.) In addition to two microphones positioned above the conductor, contact microphones have been placed on the kalimba, suspended cymbal, wood block, trombone, cello, and spiral of the conductor's score. No sounds you hear tonight were recorded or synthesized before the performance; all material heard through the speakers is live manipulated material from the microphones.

Symphony no. 7 in A Major, Opus 92, Ludwig van Beethoven

(Born Bonn, 1770; died Vienna, 1827)

The nine symphonies of Beethoven constitute a body of work that is perhaps without equal in human history. Collectively they explore a

vast landscape of possibilities with respect to expression, technique, and dimensions. The Beethoven symphonies form the benchmark against which all symphony composers are measured and to a large extent define of what a symphony is. Certainly, Beethoven's successors in the field of symphony composition felt the weight of his achievement. He scared off whole generations of composers who might otherwise have ventured into symphony composition. The power of the Beethoven symphonies helps us to understand the Beethoven myth—that the man was bigger than life and sought an art that spoke not only to his contemporaries but to humanity for all time. “Be embraced, O ye millions,” says a line in Schiller's *Ode to Joy*, the poetic foundation of the Ninth Symphony.

One upshot of the Beethoven myth was that his music was subjected to all manner of hyper-interpretation. Beethoven's music couldn't just be music; it had to be “about” something. Nineteenth-century commentators produced reams of fanciful theories about the meaning of this or that composition. This is especially true of the Seventh Symphony. Berlioz called it a peasant dance, and to Wagner it represented an “apotheosis of the dance.” Wilhelm von Lenz (*Beethoven et ses trois styles*, 1855) viewed the Seventh Symphony as a second Pastoral Symphony, with its own village wedding scene and peasant dances. Others found in it a political revolution, a festival of knights, a drunken masquerade, a “bacchic orgy,” a pilgrimage to an old cathedral, and images of feudal times. The list goes on.

Today we smile at Romantic attempts to make musical compositions “say” things that were never intended. But in this case, Berlioz and Wagner and the rest may have been on to something. One notes a common thread, or rather two or three, running through any number of commentaries on this work—namely, rhythmic energy, liberation, and joy. To even the most casual listener, Beethoven's Seventh Symphony is a celebration of something very positive and uplifting. One leaves the experience with a renewed sense of optimism and resolve. In part, the work achieves this effect through its powerful rhythmic vitality. Each movement is based on its own set of distinctive

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rhythmic figures, and, in fact, in many measures it is the rhythm (rather than the melody) that we notice first and remember the longest. Case in point: In the opening bars of the second movement there is hardly any melody at all, only the underlying rhythmic pulse and those chilling open fifths. But more glorious music can scarcely be imagined.

Beethoven employs the standard four-movement scheme but (as always) with great imagination. The first movement (*Poco sostenuto; vivace*) is preceded by a remarkably long slow introduction (the longest in any Beethoven symphony) whose massive tonal blocks and multiple rhythmic layers provide a fitting counterweight to the lengthy *allegro* that follows. A three-note dotted figure pervades the movement, and we notice an unusually broad dynamic range. The second (*Allegretto*) alternates solemn hues of A minor with brighter interludes in the parallel major key. (This movement is duly famous. If Beethoven had composed nothing else,

he would still be assured a place in the history of music.) The third (*Presto; assai meno presto; presto*) is a *scherzo*. The theme of the trio is said to have been borrowed from an Austrian pilgrimage hymn. The fourth (*Allegro con brio*) is a boisterous sonata movement with a lengthy coda.

Beethoven composed the Seventh Symphony during the fall and winter of 1811–1812 and conducted the premiere in Vienna on 8 December 1813 at one of his numerous charity concerts. Not everyone in the audience was thrilled. One reviewer noted that “the whole thing lasts at least three-quarters of an hour, and is a true mixture of tragic, comic, serious, and trivial ideas, which spring from one level to another without any connection, repeat themselves to excess, and are almost wrecked by the immoderate noise of the timpani.” Nevertheless, Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony quickly became one of his most popular works, and history has shown it to be a priceless gem of the orchestral literature.

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