

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)



FAST FACTS

- Took piano lessons with a talented teacher from St. Petersburg
- Studied at the conservatory in Moscow after a series of difficult family-related events
- His music was banned in Russia when he openly criticized the government
- Toured and performed his works in America as a virtuosic concert pianist

Born: 1873 (Semyonovo, Russia)
Died: 1943 (Beverly Hills, California)

Sergei Rachmaninoff's music is among the last to come out of the Romantic period in music. His compositions are passionate and melodic, meeting the preferences of listeners, but still incorporate individuality and strong elements of his Russian heritage.

Rachmaninoff's mother and father were both amateur pianists, so when they saw talent in their son, they requested a piano teacher from St. Petersburg. After studying with that teacher for three years, Rachmaninoff's parents foolishly lost a great deal of money and had to sell their estate, and divorced not long after that. Rachmaninoff did not perform well in the school that he attended after the divorce and his own sister's death, so his mother moved him to the conservatory in Moscow. His years in the conservatory under a very strict teacher prepared Rachmaninoff for a career in composing and performing music.

At age 24, *Symphony No. 1* was premiered, but received infuriated reviews because of the conductor's clumsiness and poor interpretation of Rachmaninoff's work. These reviews prevented him from wanting to write orchestra works for a long time, so he mainly taught and performed his own small-scale piano pieces. A decade later, the corrupt Russian government forced him to leave his home, causing him to eventually move his family to New York. When Rachmaninoff wrote a letter to the *New York Times* criticizing the Russian government, his music was banned throughout Russia. His magnificent presence as well as his virtuosic piano skills, however, gave way to his career as a touring concert pianist throughout America.

Among other works, Rachmaninoff wrote and performed four piano concertos over his lifetime, which are classics today. Some composers and musicians criticize his music for being too romantic when music overall was drifting toward a very modern sound, but his compositions reflect his loyalty to his Russian heritage and stand alone as elegant and spectacular works regardless of the time period.



Let's Listen!

- Listen to Rachmaninoff himself perform his *Piano Concerto No. 2* with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1929: [click here](#).
- Byron Janis, the pupil of Rachmaninoff's friend Vladimir Horowitz, performs *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*: [click here](#).