**Piano Concerto No. 1 in F-sharp minor, Opus 1**

SERGEI VASILIEVICH RACHMANINOV was born in Semyonovo, district of Starorusky, Russia, on April 1, 1873, and died in Beverly Hills, California, on March 28, 1943. He composed the first movement of his F-sharp minor piano concerto in 1890 and completed the piece on July 18, 1891, while still a student at the Moscow Conservatory. With Vasily Safonov conducting, he played the first movement at a Moscow Conservatory concert on March 29, 1892. The score is dedicated to Alexander Siloti, his piano teacher at the Conservatory. Rachmaninoff reworked the concerto in the fall of 1917, completing the revision on November 23 that year, by which time he had already finished his Second and Third piano concertos. The revised score of the First Concerto was published by Russian Music Editions in March 1921; a two-piano arrangement of the original version was published by Gutheil in 1893, the full score not until 1971 by the Soviet State Publishing House, Moscow. Rachmaninoff introduced the revised score to New York when he appeared as soloist with the Russian Symphony Orchestra on January 28, 1919. This was most likely the first performance of the new version, which Rachmaninoff repeated with the New Symphony Orchestra (later to become the National Symphony Orchestra) on December 26 that year at Carnegie Hall.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO PIANO, the score of Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 1 calls for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, triangle, cymbals, and strings.

Rachmaninoff first came to the United States in 1909, for which occasion he composed his Third Piano Concerto in D minor. His reputation as pianist, conductor, and composer was secure, and his fame rested to a great extent on the success of two works, his C-sharp minor piano prelude and Second Piano Concerto in C minor, both composed in 1901. He would never escape the popularity of the prelude—audiences called for it wherever he went—and even considered the demand for the Second and Third concertos something of a hindrance. “I have re-written my First Concerto,” he stated in 1931. “It is really good now. All the youthful freshness is there, and yet it plays itself so much more easily. But nobody pays any attention. When I tell them in America that I will play the First Concerto, they do not protest, but I can see by their faces that they would prefer the Second or Third.”

He wrote his First Concerto while a student at the Moscow Conservatory. An attempt at a C minor piano concerto in November 1889 had come to nothing, and other works intervened, but by April 1891 he had completed the first two movements of the F-sharp minor. He finished the piece on summer holiday in 1891, in a flurry of activity, working from five in the morning until eight in the evening, composing the final movement and scoring the last two movements in the space of two and a half days. The effort left him tired but pleased. In March 1892 a concert of student works at the Moscow Conservatory provided the occasion for the premiere of the concerto, albeit just the first movement. The conductor, Vasily Safonov, professor of piano and director of the Conservatory, was notorious for making changes in the pieces to be performed on these occasions, cleaning them up, cutting them, anything to make them more playable. But Rachmaninoff held his ground, not only refusing to accept alterations, but even correcting Safonov’s tempos and shadings when the conductor’s ideas differed from his own.

By 1908, however, his attitude toward the First Concerto had changed. By this time Rachmaninoff’s works included the Second Concerto, numerous pieces for piano and voice, chamber, choral, and operatic works, and two symphonies—though it should be noted that the First had been a dreadful failure at its premiere in 1897, such a failure, in fact, that the composer submitted to hypnosis and autosuggestion to set his compositional juices flowing properly again. His appearances were in demand both at home and abroad, and he no longer considered the F-sharp concerto a suitable touring piece. Thoughts of revising the work came as early as April 1908: “Now I plan to take my First Concerto in hand tomorrow, look it over, and then decide how much time and work will be required for its new version, and whether it’s worth doing anyway. There are so many requests for this concerto, and it’s so terrible in its present form, that I should like to work at it and, if possible, get it into decent shape...”

But composing, performing, and traveling kept Rachmaninoff from the revision until November 1917, in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, and at which time regular musical activities had been suspended until a return to normal conditions. At odds with the new regime, feeling his career at a standstill, the composer seized upon an invitation to appear in Stockholm, and just before Christmas of 1917, he and his family left Russia, never to return. Rachmaninoff had previously rejected offers to stay in America (he had turned down the conductorship of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1909 and again in 1918), but decided at the end of the 1920–21 musical season to make New York City his home. He remained a resident of the United States, recording and touring on both sides of the Atlantic, and continuing to compose, until his death in 1943.

“It will have to be written all over again, for its orchestration is worse than its music,” Rachmaninoff said of the F-sharp minor’s original version; his changes had to do with matters of instrumentation, texture, and structure, the thematic content remaining basically what it was. The final product is tight, concise, even classical in form, and the thematic recurrences are on the whole quite regular. The orchestral and piano writing is considerably thinned out.
The balance between tune and figuration in the piano’s initial statement of the first-movement theme represents an alteration of an alteration, for Rachmaninoff changed this passage first during the initial revision, then in the pre-publication proofs. In the second movement, the composer lightened the texture and added touches of chromaticism. In the final form of the third movement, the fortissimo opening is new, and he omitted a prominent return of the main theme near the end.

The first movement opens Vivace, with the “youthful freshness” of the composer immediately apparent. The cascading triplets for piano that separate the introductory fanfares provide the basis for connective and transitional material later in the movement. The main theme sounds espressivo, then dolce, the second theme cantabile, Rachmaninoff’s markings ensuring the mood (as if the tunes themselves would not). The principal theme achieves its particular romantic, open quality through an immediate, sequential repetition of its opening measures. The second theme, reached by a vivace, scherzando passage, is at once insistent and halting, the lingering fourth note of the tune offsetting the rhythmic charge of the first three. The development makes much of the second theme’s opening motive, and the working out of the main theme is preceded by its appearance in the solo horn. The broad horn calls heard early in the development are straight out of Tchaikovsky, whom the student Rachmaninoff idolized. The main theme, at the recapitulation, is heard moderato and cantabile in the piano, its original upbeat restored, and the second theme’s return is made striking by a touch of solo violin. The movement’s opening fanfare returns in the piano to announce the cadenza, which concludes with a sweeping, maestoso statement of the principal theme. The prevailing calm of the D major second movement is established by an ascending motive first heard in the solo horn, that most romantic of all instruments. A piano episode offers an espressivo (again!) theme which does not appear elsewhere in the movement, and the ascending horn motif, more intense, sounding a third higher than at the start, brings in the main part of the movement, with piano filigree weaving through the orchestral texture. A rustling woodwind accompaniment is heard just before the close, which is again marked by solo horn.

As noted earlier, the fortissimo opening of the third movement is new. The finale is for the most part all energy, rhythm, and drive, punctuated by moments suggesting dance, and even jazz. Two principal themes are introduced. When they reappear after a central, lyrical episode—which contains yet another of those plaintive, winding string melodies that Rachmaninoff seems to have endlessly available—the first is recapitulated outright, the second only suggested by the intervallic swellings of winds and brass. The emotional plane of the lyrical episode just mentioned is as far from the main world of the movement as its key, E-flat major, is remote from the concerto’s home F-sharp minor, and through this interlude the piano is suitably distant and restrained. But for the most part, the orchestra in this movement accedes to the piano’s demands (if somewhat grudgingly at one point), and the soloist leads the way to the bright, Allegro vivace, F-sharp major close.

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THE INITIAL BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCES OF RACHMANINOFF’S PIANO CONCERTO NO. 1 were of the original version, on December 16 and 17, 1904, Wilhelm Gericke conducting, with Carlo Buonamici as soloist, and on November 5, 1934, Serge Koussevitzky conducting, with soloist Pauline Danforth. All subsequent BSO performances were of the revised version, which the orchestra played for the first time in November/December 1978, Seiji Ozawa conducting, with soloist Lydia Artymiw. Since then, BSO performances have featured Bella Davidovich (at Tanglewood in July 1984, Leonard Slatkin conducting), Jean-Philippe Collard (January 1991, with André Previn), Krystian Zimerman (October 1997 in Boston and New York, with Seiji Ozawa, the concerto then being recorded for Deutsche Grammophon that December), and Jean-Philippe Collard again (again with Previn, at Tanglewood in July 2007).