Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor

Barrie Martyn

An Ashgate Book

RACHMANINOFF
Composer, Pianist, Conductor

For Kate

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Introduction

Like all Gaul, the musical life of Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninoff was divided into three parts: composer, pianist and conductor; so too this book. The first and main part considers Rachmaninoff's activity as a composer, with a chronological survey of his output; the second and third parts comprise materials concerning his careers as a virtuoso pianist and conductor. In 1930, reviewing his life's work with characteristic modesty and scepticism, Rachmaninoff remarked:

> Today, when the greater part of my life is over, I am constantly troubled by the misgiving that, in venturing into too many fields, I may have failed to make the best use of my life. In the old Russian phrase, I have 'hunted three hares'. Can I be sure that I have caught one of them?

It is the author's contention that in each of his three careers Rachmaninoff not only caught his hare but achieved greatness.

Both as man and musician Rachmaninoff is a fascinating enigma and paradox, particularly for those of us in the West, where he spent the final twenty-five years of his life. During this time the enormous celebrity of his name as a composer reflected neither his reputation among generally hostile critics nor an admiring public's almost total unfamiliarity with most of his output. At the same time the place in musical history he seemed destined to be assigned alongside his country's nineteenth-century predecessors was manifestly irreconcilable with the chronology of the life of a man only one year older than Schönberg. In contrast with the extremes of emotion so powerfully and uninhibitedly expressed in his music, the private life that Rachmaninoff so carefully protected may now be seen, at least on the surface, to have been sober, even mundane, albeit with the trappings of material success and with endearing personal quirks, such as his typically twentieth-century passion for speed and the pleasure he evidently took in observing an intriguing game of poker or charades. Although in his music he wore his heart on his sleeve, except among intimates Rachmaninoff the man was always reserved, often aloof, sometimes unapproachable. Not only did his inscrutably impassive facial expression give nothing away about his inner feelings, but he lacked the vices of egotism and indiscretion that

might otherwise have broken down the barriers of reticence in his correspondence; even his wife never knew what he was composing, and this whole subject was taboo in the family circle. Although he had the world at his feet, the insecurity and self-doubt which had afflicted him near the beginning of his career after the traumatic failure of his First Symphony persisted not far below the surface throughout his life, belied by a towering physical presence and a commanding personality. At concerts he gave the impression of coming on to the stage only with the greatest reluctance and yet, at least in his later years, he used to declare that performing in public was his one satisfaction in life. No-one will ever know the price he must have paid for the battle within himself to present a front to the world that concealed his soul; the only clues are in the music, for it was here that Rachmaninoff expressed his innermost thoughts with absolute directness and sincerity.

In the years in which I grew up, immediately after World War II, Rachmaninoff perfectly epitomized the dichotomy of values that existed between the musical establishment and the concert-going public. While professional critics generally dismissed his music as second-rate and subversively reactionary, lay music lovers never ceased to respond enthusiastically to its powerful emotional appeal, finding in its continuance of nineteenth-century tradition an oasis in a desert of modernism. Since that time, with a wider and more representative cross-section of his output being heard in the concert hall and made available in recorded form, Rachmaninoff's popularity has steadily risen, and along with this has come a critical reappraisal and rehabilitation. Close intimacy with the composer increases rather than diminishes respect for his achievements; his music wears familiarity uncommonly well, as no art can without solid underlying virtues.

The reputation of Rachmaninoff the executant seems to have suffered the opposite fate to that of his music. Although his supremacy as a pianist was universally recognized during his lifetime, fashion in performance has changed so much since his death that the intrinsic merit of his art no less than the historical importance of his career both before the public and in the recording studio seems in danger of being neglected and unhonoured; it is here reasserted and examined in some detail. Rachmaninoff's work as a conductor, almost an unknown quantity in the West but a potent force for twenty years in his own country, has long since passed into forgotten history. It too, however, has been thought worth reconsidering here, not only for its inherent interest but also because his career and the repertoire he performed impinged on the central concern of Rachmaninoff's life – composition.

This Baedeker to Rachmaninoff is the product of one man's odyssey over many years. It makes no claim to be unprejudiced or nicely

balanced: I have emphasized the aspects of Rachmaninoff's music and music-making that specially interest me, hoping that the reader may share my enthusiasms. Thus, in analysing the music, I have made much of the relationship between different works, for although there was no dramatic change in the composer's style over a creative life of more than half a century, the marks of gradual evolution often point the way to later developments. I have also explored in some depth the matter of outside musical influences and the fascinating if thorny topic of the literary and pictorial stimuli, acknowledged or presumed, which seem to have played a significant part in Rachmaninoff's composing process. It has been my general intention to fill in the more conspicuous gaps left in previous studies; conversely I have deliberately passed as lightly as possible over ground already well trodden elsewhere, in particular paring mere biography to the minimum necessary to shed light on his musical life. In this regard, since its publication well over thirty years ago, the admirable biography by Bertensson and Leyda has not yet been significantly supplemented, still less supplanted, by any later account in English.

The main literary sources for the book are listed on pp. 563–4. In compiling material I have drawn heavily on Rachmaninoff's own writings, mainly and most profitably his correspondence but also his articles and interviews, disappointingly few and for the most part unrevealing though they were, and on the Soviet anthology of reminiscences about the man and the musician by his friends and colleagues. For the Russian years of Rachmaninoff's career many interesting details are to be found conveniently assembled in the two most important Soviet musicological studies of the composer, by Bryantseva and Keldïsh; for the final twenty-five years abroad most of the documentary evidence resides in the Rachmaninoff Archive in the Library of Congress in Washington, where the author spent happy and fruitful days examining the materials deposited there by the composer's wife in 1951 and brought into order by his faithful confidante and sister-in-law, Sophie Satin (Sofiya Alexandrovna Satina). Meeting and corresponding with Miss Satin herself, whose memory remained astoundingly clear even into advanced old age, was particularly useful for illuminating certain aspects of Rachmaninoff's life. For his unstinting help with matters relating to the unfinished opera *Monna Vanna* I should like to place on record my special gratitude to Mr Igor Buketoff, who has put all admirers of Rachmaninoff in his debt for rescuing this important work from oblivion and bringing it out into the light of day. Thanks are due also to Mr Brian Rust, without whose assistance the discography could not have been completed.

In the vexed matter of the transliteration of Russian names from Cyrillic script I have made no attempt to be perfectly consistent. In the

1880s, when the young Rachmaninoff (strictly transliterated 'Rakhmaninov') was taught French and so presumably also the form of his own name in Roman characters, and in the 1890s, when the composer's name appeared in both Cyrillic and Roman letters on his first published works, and in the first decades of the twentieth century, it was the convention in Europeanizing Russian names to aim at close phonetic approximation in French forms rather than strict literal correspondence. Thus a Russian final –v (pronounced 'f') was generally rendered by –ff, resulting in the spellings Taneyeff, Liadoff, Tchekhoff, etc. As the century progressed, however, the fashion began to retain the –v ending, which has now long since become the universal form (as in Gavrilov, Nureyev), and had Rachmaninoff lived in a later era he would doubtless have followed suit. The consonant in his name represented by 'kh', which to Western European eyes has the appearance of an outlandish barbarism, happens to correspond phonetically with the more approachable Teutonic 'ch' (a sound heard in the Scottish word 'loch'), which therefore looks and sounds right in its stead. In this book I have chosen to adopt the spelling of his name that Rachmaninoff himself used and in the case of other familiar personalities their current Europeanized versions; I have, however, transliterated unfamiliar names more strictly.

Like most Russian composers of his time, Rachmaninoff gave many of his compositions French titles, but although some of these, for example *Polichinelle* and the coinage *Étude-Tableau*, clearly need to remain in that form, others – *Trio élégiaque*, *Morceau de fantaisie*, etc. – like *Casse-noisette* and *Sacre du printemps* seem to me to have no greater resonance or import in French than their less pretentious English equivalents, and they have therefore generally been anglicized here. Rachmaninoff's songs I have referred to by their customary English titles. The translations of the texts themselves in the English edition range from the quaint to the desperate, and it is pleasing that they seem at last to have passed unobtrusively away through the almost universal use now of the originals. Where a musical illustration has a text, for Russian-less readers I have transliterated it and provided an English version. I have left Russian dating unchanged. The Julian calendar operated in Russia until a couple of months after Rachmaninoff had finally emigrated from his homeland, at the end of 1917, setting dates before this either twelve or thirteen days behind our own, according to whether they refer to the nineteenth or twentieth century.

Part I
RACHMANINOFF THE COMPOSER

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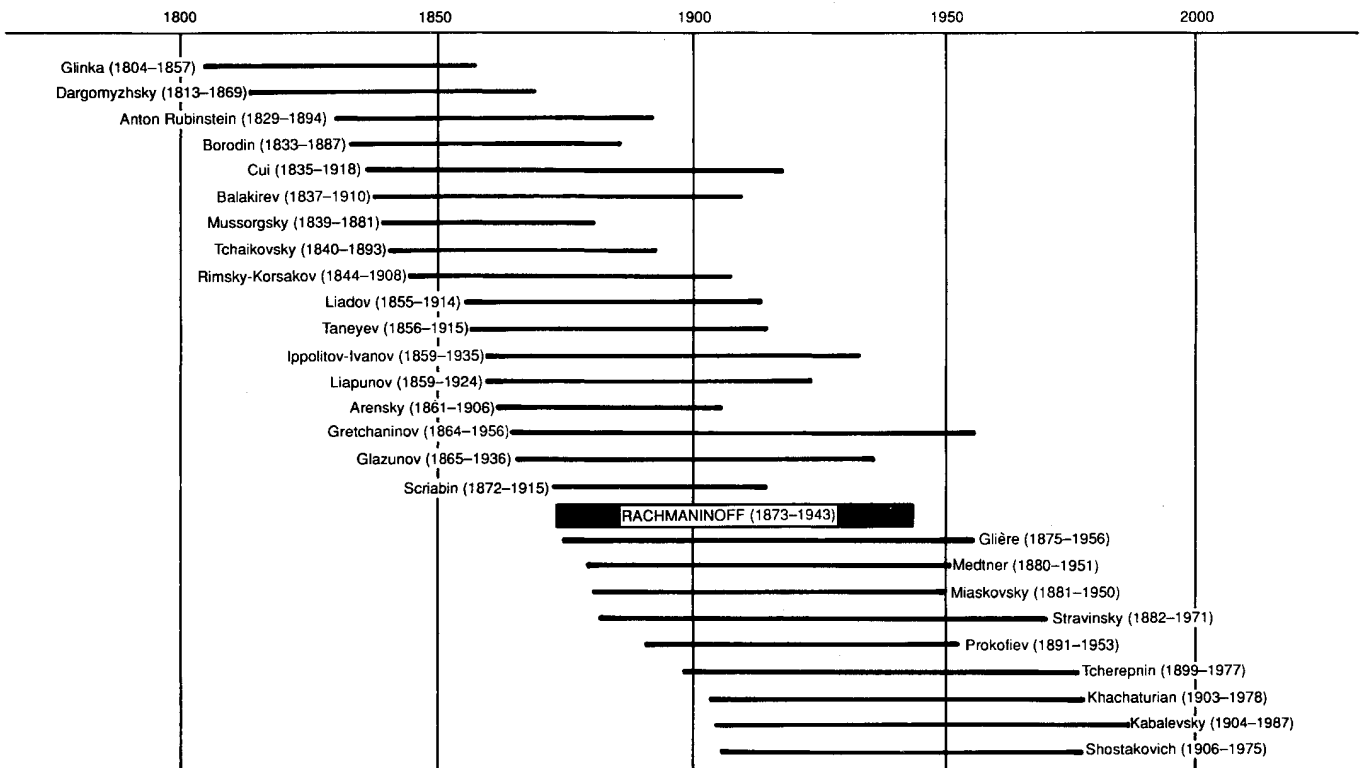
I Rachmaninoff and Russian Musical History

Rachmaninoff was born in 1873, one year before the first performance of *Boris Godunov*, forty years before *Rite of Spring*; Tolstoy was starting work on *Anna Karenina*. His close Russian contempories include Scriabin and Chaliapin, Diaghilev and Benois, Stanislavsky, Gorky, Rasputin and Lenin. The interval between the births of Glinka and Rachmaninoff – sixty-nine years – is almost the same as Rachmaninoff's own life-span: he died a few days before his seventieth birthday, in 1943, in which year Shostakovich composed his Eighth Symphony and Miaskovsky his Twenty-fourth; Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony appeared the following year. Thus the fundamental fact about Rachmaninoff's place in Russian musical history is that he stands Janus-like between the old Russia and the new, looking back to the flowering of Russian nineteenth-century 'classical' music as also ahead to the first generation of Soviet composers.

Although Glinka is traditionally cited as the founding father of Russian music, it in fact began to evolve many centuries before him.[1] The first Russian composer known by name seems to have been Tsar Ivan the Terrible (1533–1584), but both church and folk music, from which all Russian 'classical' music is ultimately derived, reach back for their origins much further still. A native church music, the counterpart of Western Gregorian plainchant, developed soon after the conversion of Russia to Christianity in 988, either out of imported Byzantine chant or, as many Soviet musicologists claim, from the ancient folk melodies of the Eastern Slavs. Curiously enough, although the origins of Russian folk music are archaic, it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that the first collections were made,[2] something that in retrospect was a hint that after so long a dormant period Russian music was at last about to take off.

The foundation by Peter the Great in 1703 of the city of St Petersburg inaugurated a century of unparalleled cultural development. The building and adornment of the new capital and the increasing brilliance of the Court attracted foreign craftsmen and creative artists in every

Chronology of Russian Composers



sphere, especially during the reign of Catherine the Great (1762–1796). Many foreign musicians visited Russia or settled there, among whom Italians were particularly numerous, including such distinguished composers as Araja, Galuppi, Traetta, Manfredini, Sarti, Paisiello and Cimarosa, who created and then exploited in St Petersburg, as Handel had done in London, a vogue for Italian opera. But in music, as in the other arts, the assimilation of foreign influences itself sparked off indigenous talent, and by the end of the century Russian-born executants and composers had emerged in appreciable numbers. Native opera began to appear in the 1770s,[3] much of it containing Russian folk music, though arguably it was not until the early years of the nineteenth century that it acquired a distinct, national character, after the Napoleonic Wars had stimulated a feeling for nationalism in Russian art generally. As Pushkin (1799–1837) began a literary renaissance, so it was through Glinka (1804–1857) that Russian music at last emancipated itself and established its own identity. The first performance of *A Life for the Tsar* in 1836 is usually seen as the inaugural event in the process, and for Tchaikovsky *Kamarinskaya* (1848) was the 'acorn' from which the oak of Russian symphonic music grew.

Glinka's Russian feeling and the strong element of dilettantism in his musical make-up[4] made the self-conscious nationalism and inspired amateurism of his spiritual heir Balakirev and his circle of Cui, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin seem a natural succession, as indeed at first it was, but even before 'The Mighty Handful' had acquired their sobriquet[5] history changed course unexpectedly. With musical life in Russia now burgeoning, a demand was created for institutionalized academic and professional training, which was satisfied by the foundation in 1859 of the Imperial Russian Musical Society and subsequently of conservatoires in St Petersburg (1862) and Moscow (1866) under the direction of the brothers Anton and Nikolay Rubinstein. Their training in Berlin and, in Anton Rubinstein's case, Vienna too, made it inevitable that the new Russian academies should be modelled on the Austro-German pattern.[6]

Balakirev promptly condemned the St Petersburg Conservatoire as a conspiracy 'to bring all Russian music under the yoke of the German generals', and through his efforts in the same year as its foundation a Free School was opened in opposition. Vladimir Stasov, the great critic and inspirational force in the arts in Russia, cited what he claimed to be European opinion in support of him: 'Academies and conservatoires serve only as a breeding ground for mediocrities and help perpetuate deleterious artistic ideas and taste . . . [They] meddle most harmfully in the student's creative activity. They dictate the style and form of his works [and] impose their own fixed practices on him.'[7] As the supreme

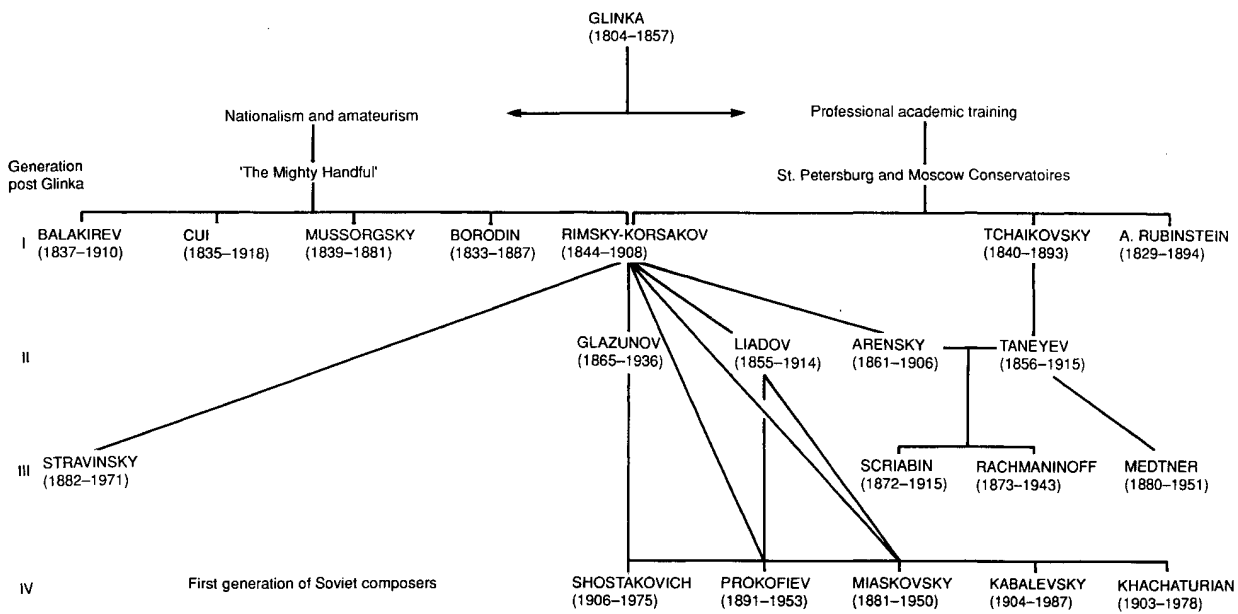
martinet, dogmatist and meddler in his colleagues' musical affairs proved to be Balakirev himself, these words from his apostle were ironical indeed.

Inasmuch as the conservatoires failed to tap new veins of creative talent or to do very much for their outstanding students, they realized the forebodings of their critics. Rachmaninoff was a case in point. Allowed as a young teenager at St Petersburg Conservatoire to fritter away his time, he had to be taken away and brought sternly to heel by the Moscow pedagogue Nikolay Zverev. At Moscow Conservatoire, according to his own admission,[8] he learned more about the nature of fugue from two chance lessons than from a whole year's classes with Arensky, and his course in counterpoint, despite the impeccable credentials of the teacher, Taneyev, the ultimate Russian authority on the subject, also proved ill-spent. Rachmaninoff survived on his own talent; his classmate Scriabin left the institution without even gaining a diploma in composition. Although predictably unsuccessful in catering for creative genius, the conservatoires nevertheless served a valuable function in providing a thorough professional training for executants, and they performed the useful incidental service of conferring on their graduates the status of 'Free Artist', a title originally created by Catherine the Great only for architects and painters; by putting their graduates on a par the conservatoires gave social respectability to a profession previously classified as proletarian.

The case against academic training was rather undermined at the outset by the towering stature of the first composer to emerge from St Petersburg Conservatoire, Tchaikovsky, pupil of the arch villain Anton Rubinstein, who himself, at least in some of his later works, such as the 'Russian' Symphony of 1880 and the orchestral fantasy *Russia* of 1882, could be self-consciously nationalist. Though Tchaikovsky had severe reservations about the work of 'The Mighty Handful' and their lack of professionalism, in some senses he might have been one of their number himself; he incorporated Russian folk music in his compositions, as in the Second Symphony; he was on friendly personal terms with the group – *Romeo and Juliet* was dedicated to Balakirev, *The Tempest* to Stasov; and, like all the others, he more than once accepted Balakirev's detailed criticism and advice (both *Romeo* and the 'Manfred' Symphony owed their genesis to him). Conversely, Balakirev and the others in their turn all came to use classical contrapuntal techniques in their work,[9] and all but Cui at least essayed a symphony, that symbol of classical tradition, as if this was the only way they could convince themselves they had musically come of age.

Even before Rachmaninoff's birth the gulf between professionalism and amateurism had been bridged by Rimsky-Korsakov, who had won

Pedagogic Genealogy of Russian Composers



sufficient recognition and respectability to find an uneasy and incongruous niche in the musical establishment on the staff of St Petersburg Conservatoire, where he remained for thirty-seven years, mentor of the younger composers up to Stravinsky and Prokofiev, though not, to Rachmaninoff's later regret, of Rachmaninoff himself. Glazunov, protégé of 'The Mighty Handful', completed the process of reconciliation by combining in his music Russian nationalism with western tradition. After Glazunov all Russian composers, including Rachmaninoff but with the conspicuous exception of Stravinsky, learned their craft by the academic route and not the path of amateurism, which in retrospect was inevitably a dead-end.

By the time Rachmaninoff had graduated from the Moscow Conservatoire in 1892, whatever might once have been the collective identity and ideals of the nationalist group, and these were always more concepts in the minds of music critics than a practical reality for those involved, had long since ceased to exist. Two of their number were dead, Mussorgsky (1881) and Borodin (1887), and a new circle of lesser composers had emerged under the aegis of the timber millionaire and publisher Mitrofan Belyayev. The bilious Cui, who continued to compose for another quarter-century into ripe old age, then as now was known less for his music than for his writings (which include the much-quoted and notoriously damning review of Rachmaninoff's First Symphony). Balakirev, once the leader and driving force, had gone through a psychological crisis, and although he had come out of seclusion to resume musical activity and indeed was to enjoy an Indian summer as a composer, he was never again a major figure. Thus it was Rimsky-Korsakov who in the end became the doyen of the group.

The story of 'The Mighty Handful' is a fascinating one. Who has not been intrigued by the paradox of the cosmopolitan and westward-looking court capital, and not reactionary and culturally introspective Moscow, coming to be the centre of their movement? What imagination has not been stirred by the thought of a handful of pioneering amateur underdogs taking on the might of the state academic machine; by pictures of the striking oriental physiognomy of Balakirev or by Repin's unforgettable portrait of Mussorgsky in the Tretyakov Gallery; by the legendary post-humous completions of *Prince Igor*, *Khovanshchina* and other works; by the exoticism of *Boris Godunov*, *Tamara*, *Scheherazade*; by the double careers of Rimsky the naval officer, of Dr Borodin the Professor of Chemistry, of Balakirev the railway clerk, of Cui the military strategist, and of Mussorgsky the alcoholic? No other Russian composers, and certainly not Rachmaninoff, have so fairy-tale a background, and yet the widespread familiarity of music lovers with the lives of these charismatic personalities is not matched by their relatively modest contribution to

the regular repertoire and average musical consciousness. Balakirev is remembered only by the piano spectacular *Islamey* and, though lip service is paid to *Tamara* and the First Symphony, these works are familiar not through concert performance but through the gramophone. The Lithuanian-Parisian Cui, in any case the odd-man-out in the group, is for all practical purposes a totally closed book; Mussorgsky is known only by *Boris Godunov*, *Pictures at an Exhibition* and a handful of songs; and Borodin by the Overture and *Polovtsian Dances* from *Prince Igor*, the Second Symphony and *In the Steppes of Central Asia.* Rimsky-Korsakov alone was truly prolific, but even of his output only a few colourful orchestral works are familiar to the average music lover: *Scheherazade*, *Russian Easter Festival Overture*, *Spanish Caprice.*

This focusing of interest in nineteenth-century Russian music on the nationalists has drawn attention away from their conservatoire colleagues. Anton Rubinstein, whose vast and undervalued output still awaits proper recognition, is the most glaring example of this neglect, but Rachmaninoff's teachers Taneyev and Arensky have fared little better. Rachmaninoff was two years under Taneyev studying counterpoint and five under Arensky studying harmony, fugue and free composition. The longer period of contact with Arensky left its mark on Rachmaninoff's early compositions, in which the style of his teacher is plainly discernible alongside that of his distant guiding star, Tchaikovsky.

Arensky (1861–1906) studied with Rimsky-Korsakov at St Petersburg and at the age of twenty-one was appointed to the staff of Moscow Conservatoire, where he remained for thirteen years, active as both teacher and composer. Songs, chamber, ballet and other orchestral music poured from his pen, as well as a vast quantity of piano music, much of which reveals a natural affinity with salon music. In 1890 his first opera, *A Dream on The Volga*, based on the same Ostrovsky play as Tchaikovsky's *Voyevoda*, was successfully launched in Moscow, and in 1895 he moved back to St Petersburg as Director of the Imperial Chapel Choir. Alas, his youthful success waned and, like Mussorgsky, he died in his forties, an alcoholic.

In lacking a distinct, individual musical personality Arensky was a more prolific Moscow counterpart to his equally neglected Petersburg contemporary Liapunov. Rimsky's vitriolic prophecy about the composer – 'He will soon be forgotten'[10] – has in time all but come true, though the charming Waltz from the First Suite for Two Pianos survives, and so too the Variations on a Theme by Tchaikovsky; Heifetz championed the Piano Trio and made a violin and piano transcription of part of the Violin Concerto as a recital item; Sir Henry Wood performed some of the orchestral pieces in early Promenade concerts, and in the 1905–6 season of Kerzin concerts in Moscow Rachmaninoff himself conducted

the First Symphony. Written when Arensky was only 22, this fine work, with echoes of both Borodin (the Second Symphony) and Tchaikovsky, shows a promise that was never fulfilled. It also exemplifies the two dominant features of the composer's musical make-up: its obviously Russian character and its Tchaikovskian lyricism; both reappeared in the work of his pupil Rachmaninoff.

Taneyev (1856–1915) studied piano and composition at Moscow Conservatoire with Nikolay Rubinstein and Tchaikovsky, and after becoming the latter's close friend and the chief interpreter of his First Concerto, he gave the premieres of all his other works for piano and orchestra. Like Rachmaninoff, he won the conservatoire's gold medal at the age of nineteen. He returned as a teacher three years later, held the post of Director from 1885 to 1889, and finally resigned in 1905 to give himself more seriously to his careers as a pianist and composer. During his years at the conservatoire, when he viewed his own activity as a composer with sceptical indifference, a growing interest in Renaissance contrapuntal music by Josquin des Prés, Lassus and Palestrina set him off on a lifetime's study of the technique of counterpoint. Something at least of Taneyev's enthusiasm seems to have rubbed off on Rachmaninoff, whose Second Symphony, with its display of contrapuntal dexterity, was an eminently appropriate work to dedicate to his teacher.

It seemed self-evident to those who gasped in amazed reverence at Taneyev's gigantic feats of scholarship and endurance[11] that the music created by such an intellect could not be other than aridly academic; after all, did not Taneyev regard counterpoint as merely a branch of mathematics? Yet, though he never lost this stigma, in the main it is undeserved, just as it is by his pupil Medtner, of whom the same criticism has been made. It is true that Rimsky-Korsakov described Taneyev's early composition as 'most dry and laboured in character', but he also noted that from the nineties, when Taneyev devoted himself more to composition, things changed, and his opera *The Oresteia*, which might have been expected to turn out 'dry and academic', in view of all the contrapuntal exercises carried out on the material before composition proper was started, proved to be 'striking in its wealth of beauty and expressiveness.'[12] Nor did Rimsky live to hear the delightful Concert Suite for Violin and Orchestra (1909), which utterly confounds the charge; and the symphonies, songs and chamber music all prove Taneyev to be a real composer and not just a musical mathematician. Rachmaninoff once conducted the Overture to *The Oresteia*, and used to play the Prelude and Fugue in G sharp minor, Op. 29, in recital, but no-one since him has seriously taken up the piece.

Taneyev's influence on Rachmaninoff's musical upbringing probably extended to some transfer of his own sympathies towards western

classical tradition and of the low opinion he had, at least in his earlier years, of the St Petersburg composers. On both counts this would have been very much in tune with the general musical philosophy already instilled into Rachmaninoff by Zverev. More than twenty years later Taneyev was still acting as his guru, with Rachmaninoff continuing to take his new compositions to him for approval right up to the time of the *All-Night Vigil* of 1915, the year of Taneyev's death.

The other influence on Rachmaninoff's musical personality, albeit an indirect one, was Tchaikovsky, whom the young composer first met at Zverev's when he was thirteen years of age. Already in his pre-conservatoire days Rachmaninoff's sister Elena had introduced him to Tchaikovsky's music through the songs, and Zverev, Tchaikovsky's friend, no doubt encouraged his enthusiasm. Although Rachmaninoff's music has sometimes been glibly categorized as 'like Tchaikovsky', except in the most superficial way this is quite untrue.

Certainly Rachmaninoff's upbringing as a composer in Moscow was at a time when Tchaikovsky was the city's musical hero; and it was Tchaikovsky, one of the examiners for Rachmaninoff's conservatoire graduation, who awarded him an unprecedentedly flattering mark. But Rachmaninoff was never his pupil, and there is no evidence that he sought his advice about any of his compositions. This is not to say that Tchaikovsky took no interest in what Rachmaninoff was doing; he made a public demonstration of support for the young composer at the premiere of his graduation opera *Aleko* and gave him advice about getting his work published. In the same year, 1892, the year before he died, Tchaikovsky gave an interview to a St Petersburg critic, to which Rachmaninoff refers in a letter to his friend Mikhail Slonov: 'Tchaikovsky tells the critic that he is being forced to give up composition and make way for young talents. To the question of whether they really exist Tchaikovsky answers, "Yes", and names, in Petersburg, Glazunov, and in Moscow, myself and Arensky. This was a real joy for me. Thanks to the old man for not forgetting me.'[13] These are certainly not the words of an infatuated protégé or chosen spiritual heir.

Tchaikovsky's premature death created a void in Moscow musical life that his disciples Taneyev and Arensky were not big enough to fill. This left the field open to the rising stars of the next generation, Rachmaninoff and Scriabin, who have the unexpected distinction of being the first international figures to emerge from Moscow Conservatoire. Their upbringing took place in what proved to be the last flowering of the old régime before music entered the no-man's land that preceded modernism, but whereas Scriabin's restless imagination led him along new paths, Rachmaninoff was happy to work within the traditions he inherited, already obsolescent though they were. This has often encour-

aged Western critics to the view that musically the composer belongs more naturally to the nineteenth than to the twentieth century, which in a sense, of course, he does. The contrast in the 1900s between the staid Rachmaninoff and the volatile and ceaselessly evolving Scriabin, Rachmaninoff's hardly concealed distaste for almost all contemporary music, his musical and physical isolation after the Russian Revolution, in which his sympathies and life-style linked him to a vanished age, the single-mindedly sour reception accorded his works by fashionable critics on the grounds of anachronism, even his performing repertoire – all this points to a man rooted firmly in the nineteenth century. But this simplistic view is misleading and has to be reconciled with the external facts of Rachmaninoff's personal life, which make him very much a man of his own time: he drove a car for thirty years, enjoyed speedboats, had a distinctly 1930s house built for himself, met Walt Disney, lived among movie stars in Beverly Hills, and died only two years before the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

At the turn of the century Rachmaninoff's music must have sounded perfectly in keeping with the times. Indeed, in comparison with Glazunov's sparklingly scored but musically unadventurous Fifth Symphony and Scriabin's Chopinesque Piano Concerto, both of 1895, Rachmaninoff's First Symphony of the same year was daring enough to be vilified by Cui for its outlandish modernism. Tchaikovsky's 'Pathétique' Symphony had appeared only two years before, Brahms's Clarinet Sonatas the preceding year, and Dvořàk's Cello Concerto the very same year; Sibelius's First Symphony and Elgar's 'Enigma' Variations were still a year or two ahead. But whereas Tchaikovsky, Brahms and Dvořàk were then nearly at the end of their lives, Sibelius, Elgar and Rachmaninoff were near the beginning of their fame and creative careers, neither young enough nor temperamentally inclined to emancipate themselves from the past but beyond the point of being able to embrace the future. Thus, as time passed, they found themselves moving into a state of musical limbo, and by the 1920s all three had, to a greater or lesser degree, withdrawn from composition: Sibelius stopped abruptly after *Tapiola* and the Incidental Music to 'The Tempest', in 1926; Elgar after the Cello Concerto, in 1919; and Rachmaninoff after revising the First Concerto, in 1917, after which he wrote only six other works in the remaining twenty-five years of his life. In all three cases the pundits had facile explanations: Sibelius had said all he had to say; Elgar had been creatively paralysed by the death of his wife, Rachmaninoff by exile. Though these rationalizations were not without some foundation, the real underlying causes were much more complex, probably having much to do with the nature of the times and the attitudes of critics and public. A Sibelius vogue in the interwar years outlived its strength

and petered out; Elgar, ignored by the arbiters of fashion, persuaded himself, not without cause, that no-one was interested in his music, an impression traumatically confirmed by the sparse attendance at his notorious seventieth birthday concert; and what would-be connoisseur of the 1920s and 30s, if he wished to consider himself abreast of fashion, would in those years have admitted to liking Rachmaninoff?

Rachmaninoff was not, therefore, a lone maverick atavist among progressive contemporaries, for one of the side effects of the revolution started by Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in 1913 was that a whole generation of conservative musicians found themselves stranded in a lost world, cut off from the mainstream of musical development. This was particularly true of those Russian composers who came to maturity during the last years of the nineteenth century. Some, such as Liapunov and Glazunov, left Russia for good at different times after the 1917 Revolution, but few of those who did so transplanted themselves successfully. In the West, Russian music was still something of a specialist interest and its lesser lights unknown or ignored. Those composers of the old guard who soldiered on, temporarily or permanently, in the Soviet Union, most notably Glière and Ippolitov-Ivanov, created a musical backwater.

Like Sibelius and Elgar, but unlike his contemporaries Scriabin and Stravinsky, Rachmaninoff continued to write in a style basically unchanged from first to last, so carrying over for forty years into the twentieth century the musical tradition he had inherited in the nineteenth. Starting his career in tune with the times, he finished it as a musical Canute. Nineteen years before the composer's death, the progressive Soviet critic Viktor Belyayev summed up Rachmaninoff's predicament in an article written as though his music was already in the past tense: 'It was Rachmaninoff's fate to live in the midst of this multitude of jostling and divergent currents in contemporary Russian music . . . In this concourse of circumstances we see the reason for the profoundest tragedy of his work – the tragedy of a great soul expressing itself in language and by methods which were antiquated, whereas under other conditions they would have harmonised with the times.'[14]

The death of Rimsky-Korsakov in 1908 left Scriabin, Medtner and Rachmaninoff as the three most distinguished living Russian composers. Scriabin survived only fifteen years into the twentieth century, and yet during that time he advanced in musical style along his own esoteric path no less far than did Schönberg, his junior by only two years, along his. At the same time as the latter progressed from the Wagnerian sumptuousness of *Verklärte Nacht* (1899) to the stark atonality of the Five Orchestral Pieces (1909), Scriabin left the still waters of the traditionally-anchored First Symphony for the uncharted chromaticism of the last piano sonatas. Yet, unlike Schönberg, Scriabin created a musical

cul-de-sac, and his early death brought an abrupt halt to a still evolving style before it could establish itself as something durable or influential. As a result, Scriabin's reputation declined rapidly after his death, and, at least in the West, he still suffers shameful neglect.

In contrast with Scriabin, Medtner was stylistically fully-fledged at the outset of his career, and throughout his creative life he departed from the style of his first compositions as little as any composer in history. Like Rachmaninoff, with whom he was on the closest terms and who valued his work more than any other contemporary composer's, Medtner was uprooted from his native land, but unlike Rachmaninoff he brought with him no already-celebrated name. But for occasional concert appearances and recordings, Medtner devoted all his energy to composition, pursuing his vocation with almost religious fervour. Naturally he shared with Rachmaninoff a pathological distaste for modernism and he set down his creed on the artist's responsibilities in his book *The Muse and the Fashion* (1935), the last of the ten works published by Rachmaninoff's daughters' Paris publishing house Tair.[15] Medtner's almost complete lack of recognition except by a faithful band of acolytes and a handful of connoisseurs is a heinous crime against musical justice. His music, which has a strong vein of western classicism lacking in Rachmaninoff, is akin to his friend's in its beauty and fastidious craftsmanship, yet in no way derivative from it.

Like Medtner, Rachmaninoff left Russia after the 1917 Revolution and thereafter incurred the displeasure of those for whom anything that was not 'progressive' stank of dry rot. For some critics it was as if he lacked the respectability and importance conferred by death at the same time as being too old and too outmoded to merit the interest of the moment; for many music lovers, on the other hand, he represented the last bastion of musical civilization, under siege by the barbarian hordes of modernism. In the interwar period this schism was almost, but not quite, total.[16] A pointed but not unbalanced digest of the situation appeared in an article by Clinton Gray-Fisk[17] published to celebrate Rachmaninoff's seventieth birthday, in which a conspectus of critical comment was presented, with the perpetrators discreetly left anonymous:

> The most popular of all Rachmaninoff's works, the Second Piano Concerto, which has successfully survived every sort of performance for over forty years, was dismissed by one word, 'twaddle'. Another critic informed us that the same concerto '. . . is the sort of thing that any pianist and orchestra could extemporise by the yard.' The Fourth Concerto also received its fair share of abuse and after its first performance was immediately dubbed the 'Three Blind Mice' Concerto because of the slow movement's superficial resemblance to the tune. The superb Rhapsody, Op. 43, naturally came in for a chorus of critical cat-calls (with the honourable exceptions of Ernest Newman and Sorabji), such as 'lacks a

> really musical foundation', 'trite to the verge of cheapness', 'just a concert piece for the composer's playing, and the day for that sort of thing is past', 'quite unimportant, very little distinction or originality', and 'even more threadbare than the Fourth Concerto; Rachmaninoff as a composer has not progressed one jot since his First Concerto, Op. 1'. The great Third Concerto, Op. 30, too, was soundly trounced; and our pundits described it as 'half-an-hour of padding', 'genteel vulgarity', 'definitely not highly distinguished music', 'not one of his most characteristic works', etc., the last movement being alleged to suffer from 'sectional form, inventive laziness and vamping'. The Second Symphony has been described as 'the best impersonation of good music I have heard'. The Third Symphony 'made an effect of purposelessness'. And of his work in general we read that 'one need not place Rachmaninoff's musical ideals higher than the literary ideals of a novelist of the second rank'; 'his invention failed him at the same time as the society into which he had been born crumbled under his feet'; 'he seems to have begun life with a large roll of effectively patterned musical material from which he has cut off so many yards for a concerto, even more for a symphony, and short strips for pieces'; 'a life-long failure to think of inspired and clinching ideas is unlikely to repair itself after the age of sixty'; and that 'it is synthetic music poured from a jug'. And to crown all this one writer goes so far as to prophesy: 'I doubt if posterity will rank him higher than Raff or Paganini!' (Can anyone imagine the possibility of a Raff or Paganini festival?) As for 'posterity', it is worth noting that in a recent plebiscite in America, when people were asked which living composers are most likely to be performed a hundred years hence, Rachmaninoff was given third place, the first and second being Sibelius and Strauss.

Rachmaninoff's apologists looked around in angry bewilderment for possible reasons behind such immoderate critical spite. Gray-Fisk himself probably hit the mark in putting it down to temperamental antipathy, pointing to Rachmaninoff's isolation from so-called fashionable modernist cliques; Rachmaninoff's biographer Riesemann had earlier argued that musicians with dual careers as composers and professional pianists, like Rachmaninoff, are viewed by critics with suspicion if not animosity,[18] a point already made by the Parsee composer and critic Kaikhosru Sorabji:

> It is a cliché of the cheaper kind of criticism, especially in England and America, that a man cannot be a great interpretative and a great creative artist. When, like Liszt and Busoni, he is both, and in both respects of the highest order, the lie has to be bolstered up at all costs, and we see a deliberate campaign of denigration and belittlement set going against his creative work, which is dubbed 'virtuoso-music', 'pianist's music', and so on, quite regardless of honesty, fairness or truth.[19]

The term 'composer-pianist' used to be applied pejoratively to the great Romantic virtuosi of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most of whom composed more or less trivial pieces to include in recital

programmes otherwise given over to the works of other composers. From the distant past the names of Leschetizky, d'Albert and Chaminade come to mind, and of Rachmaninoff's great contemporaries those of Hofmann, Godowsky, Rosenthal, Levitzki and Friedman. Though by no means all their music was without merit (especially in the case of Godowsky), the stigma of the second-rate attaching to composer-pianists has never been entirely erased, and with varying degrees of justification composers such as Anton Rubinstein, Dohnányi, Paderewski and Busoni have arguably all received less than their deserts from critics. Yet it can easily be forgotten that Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Liszt, Debussy, Bartók, Prokofiev and Benjamin Britten, among others, were all also composer-pianists, and although they confined themselves almost totally to performing their own works, so did Rachmaninoff for the first forty-five years of his life, the period during which by far the largest part of his creative activity took place and his fame as a composer was at its height.

Whatever the reasons for Rachmaninoff's reputation among professional critics having sunk so low, it declined still further after his death. Sorabji devoted a whole chapter of a book to a counter-attack,[20] but prejudice, contempt and ignorance were all ingloriously combined in the patronizing and by now notorious article by Eric Blom in the fifth edition of *Grove's Dictionary*, appearing in 1954, which replaced an innocuous if ludicrously obsolete sketch by Rosa Newmarch in the fourth edition. Blom wrote:

> As a composer [Rachmaninoff] can hardly be said to have belonged to his time at all, and he represented his country only in the sense that accomplished but conventional composers like Glazunov or Arensky did. He had neither the national characteristics of the Balakirev school nor the individuality of Taneyev or Medtner. Technically he was highly gifted, but also severely limited. 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 Rachmaninoff's works had in his lifetime is not likely to last, and musicians never regarded it with much favour. The third pianoforte Concerto was on the whole liked by the public only because of its close resemblance to the second, while the fourth, which attempted something like a new departure, was a failure from the start.

The article in *Grove* is important because it remained holy writ for so long and enshrined prejudices and misconceptions that were rehashed in different contexts again and again over the years. However, it should be said that Blom, who also despised Mahler and Richard Strauss but, paradoxically, admired Medtner, was not putting forward merely his own paranoid viewpoint but reflecting a general opinion of the time, one which lingered on, at least in the English musical establishment, for a generation.[21]

Meanwhile, Rachmaninoff's music, far from suffering the long-expected demise, refused to lie down. In the 1950s and 60s, with the advent of long-playing records, there was an explosion of musical interest generally, and soon a Romantic revival was underway. Rachmaninoff's less familiar works, previously loved only by the faithful few, began to get an airing and gain wider acceptance; in particular, through the proselytizing efforts of conductors like André Previn, his symphonic music at last began to come into its own. A new generation of critics began to disinter 'masterpieces' which their predecessors had helped to bury. *The Bells*, the *All-Night Vigil* and other works of Rachmaninoff were reconsidered, and along with Elgar, Mahler and others, the composer began to win unwonted critical approval as well as public popularity.

The Rachmaninoff centenary in 1973 was celebrated modestly. In his own country a commemorative concert at Moscow Conservatoire with the USSR State Symphony Orchestra under Yevgeny Svetlanov included the *Symphonic Dances*; Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphians performed *The Bells*; London contented itself with a chamber concert. There was a conspicuous lack of commemorative books and articles,[22] which, in an age obsessed with reappraisal, perhaps meant that Rachmaninoff had at last shed the accretion of clichés attached to him for so long by both detractors and apologists and had reached the stage when his work was accepted on its own merits.

References

1 For a succinct history in English of early Russian music see: *History of Russian Music, Vol. 1, From its Origins to Dargomyzhsky*, by Gerald R. Seaman, pub. Blackwell, Oxford, 1977. On a monumental scale the two classic accounts are: *Ocherki po istorii muziki v Rossii s drevneishikh vremen do kontsa XVIII veka*, by Nikolay Findeisen, 2 vols., Moscow, 1928/29, and *Annales de la Musique et des Musiciens en Russie au XVIII^e siècle*, by R. Aloys Mooser, 3 vols., Geneva, 1948 and 1951.

2 The first collection of authentic Russian folksong was the four albums of eighty songs compiled by Vasily Fyodorovich Trutovsky, published over the years 1776–1795. The collection of Ivan Prach, famous for being quarried by Beethoven for the 'Razumovsky' Quartets and by Rossini, appeared in 1790.

3 The first Russian opera by a native composer was *Anyuta* (1772), probably by V.A.Pashkevich (the music is lost); the first preserved intact is Zorin's *Pererozhdeniye* ('The Regeneration'), dating from 1777, which is based partly on folk melodies.

4 Except for a few months' study in Berlin with Siegfried Dehn, subsequently teacher of Anton Rubinstein, when he was 29 years of age, and again in 1856, the year before he died, Glinka had no serious professional music training.

5 The nickname 'The Mighty Handful' was coined by Vladimir Stasov in a review of a concert in Petersburg on 24 May 1867, conducted by Balakirev, at which the latter's *Overture on Czech Themes* and Rimsky-Korsakov's *Fantasy on Serbian Themes* were first performed.
6 At Petersburg the absence of Russian-born staff employed by the new conservatoire seemed deliberate policy; the famous Polish pedagogues Theodor Leschetizky (1830–1915) and Henryk Wieniawski (1835–1888) headed the piano and violin faculties; aesthetics, history, theory and composition were in the hands of English, German and Italian tutors.
7 *Vladimir Stasov, Selected Essays on Music*, translated by Florence Jones. Barrie & Rockliff, The Cresset Press, London, 1968, p. 83.
8 *Riesemann*, p. 68.
9 A good example of this paradox is the fugal exposition of the first movement of Balakirev's Piano Sonata.
10 *Rimsky-Korsakov*, p. 418.
11 Taneyev's study of counterpoint appeared in published form after twenty-two years' labour; his work on canon was unfinished after fourteen years, at his death. *Convertible Counterpoint in the Strict Style* has been translated into English by G. Ackley Brower, and published by Bruce Humphries, Boston, Mass., USA, 1962.
12 *Rimsky-Korsakov*, pp. 382 and 384.
13 R. to Slonov, 14 December 1892.
14 Victor Belaiev (*sic*): 'Sergei Rakhmaninov', in *Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 13, 1927, pp. 375–376.
15 *The Muse and the Fashion* was translated by Alfred J. Swan and published in 1951 by Haverford College Bookstore, Haverford, Pennsylvania, USA.
16 See, for example, the disdainful article on Rachmaninoff by Paul Rosenfield in *The New Republic*, 15 March 1919, pp. 208–210, or Edward Sackville West's dismissive review of the Second Symphony in *The Spectator*, 20 September 1924. For the other side see Richard Holt's appreciative article on Rachmaninoff in the January 1929 issue of *The Gramophone*, correspondence for and against after a review of *The Isle of the Dead* in the same periodical, November and December 1931, January 1932, and a letter from Robert Woodfield in the November 1938 issue, begging the question, 'Who is the greatest living composer?'
17 *Musical Opinion*, April 1943, pp. 221–222.
18 *Riesemann*, p. 247.
19 *Sorabji*, p. 59.
20 'Rachmaninoff and Rabies' in *Mi Contra Fa*, by Kaikhosru Sorabji, Porcupine Press, London, 1947.
21 When Geoffrey Norris's book on Rachmaninoff in the 'Master Musicians' series was reviewed in the *Musical Times* of December 1976, the review was given the patronizing title 'Master Rachmaninoff'.
22 The only commemorative review in English of the composer's work seems to have been 'Sergei Rachmaninoff, 1873–1943' by Stephen Walsh in *Tempo*, No. 105, June 1973.

Chronological Summary of Rachmaninoff's Principal Compositions

First Period

Student years

1890-91	First Concerto
	Elegiac Trio in G minor
1891	*Russian Rhapsody*, for two pianos
	'Youth' Symphony
	Prince Rostislav, symphonic poem
1892	*Aleko*, opera

Free Artist

1892	*Prelude* and *Oriental Dance*, for cello and piano, Op. 2
	Five *Fantasy Pieces*, for piano (including Prelude in C sharp minor), Op. 3
1892-93	Six Songs, Op. 4
	Fantasy-Pictures (First Suite), for two pianos, Op. 5
	Two *Salon Pieces*, for violin and piano, Op. 6
	The Crag, fantasy for orchestra, Op. 7
	O Mother of God Perpetually Praying, sacred concerto
	Six Songs, Op. 8
	Elegiac Trio in D minor, Op. 9
1893-94	Seven *Salon Pieces*, for piano, Op. 10
1894	Six Piano Duets, Op. 11
	Gypsy Caprice, for orchestra, Op. 12
1895	First Symphony, Op. 13
	Six Choruses, Op. 15
1896	Twelve Songs, Op. 14
	Six *Moments Musicaux*, for piano, Op. 16

Second Period

Moscow

1900-01	Second Concerto, Op. 18
	Second Suite, for two pianos, Op. 17
1901	Sonata for Piano and Cello, Op. 19
1902	*Spring*, cantata, Op. 20
	Twelve Songs, Op. 21
1902-03	Variations on a Theme of Chopin, for piano, Op. 22
1903	Ten Preludes (first set), for piano, Op. 23
1903-04	*The Miserly Knight*, opera, Op. 24
1904-05	*Francesca da Rimini*, opera, Op. 25
1906	Fifteen Songs, Op. 26

Dresden

1906-08	Second Symphony, Op. 27
1907-08	First Piano Sonata, Op. 28
1907	*Monna Vanna*, opera
1909	*The Isle of the Dead*, symphonic poem, Op. 29

Ivanovka

1909	Third Concerto, Op. 30
1910	*Liturgy of St John Chrysostom*, Op. 31
	Thirteen Preludes (second set), for piano, Op. 32
1911	Nine *Études-Tableaux* (first set), for piano, Op. 33
1912	Fourteen Songs, Op. 34
1913	*The Bells*, choral symphony, Op. 35
	Second Piano Sonata, Op. 36
1915	*All-Night Vigil*, Op. 37
1916	Six Songs, Op. 38
	Nine *Études-Tableaux* (second set), for piano, Op. 39
1917	Revision of First Concerto, Op. 1

Third Period

New World

1921-41	Various piano transcriptions
1926	Fourth Concerto, Op. 40
	Three Russian Songs, Op. 41
1931	Variations on a Theme of Corelli, for piano, Op. 42
	Revision of Second Piano Sonata
1934	Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43
1935-36	Third Symphony, Op. 44
1940	Revision of four early piano pieces
	Symphonic Dances, Op. 45
1941	Revision of Fourth Concerto

2 Rachmaninoff's Composing Career and Musical Style

Rachmaninoff's life as a composer is divided naturally into three main periods, not by a once-statutory convention of music criticism but by two traumatic events: the disastrous premiere of his First Symphony and the Bolshevik Revolution. In terms of opus numbers, the first period, 1886–1897, covering his years as a student at Moscow Conservatoire and immediately after as a graduate 'Free Artist', stretches as far as the *Moments musicaux*, Op. 16; the second, 1897–1917, in which activity as a composer was divided between Moscow, Dresden and the beloved family estate of Ivanovka, runs from the time of the Second Concerto up to the second set of *Études-Tableaux*, Op. 39; the third, 1917–1943, the period of self-imposed exile, comprises Ops. 40–45.

Between 1886 and 1892, as a student at Moscow Conservatoire, Rachmaninoff essayed a wide range of composition. However, with few exceptions, these early pieces are to be seen merely as experimental exercises rather than as fully-fledged productions on their own; Rachmaninoff himself allowed only a few of the later of them to appear in print,[1] although virtually all of them were edited and published in the Soviet Union in the years immediately after World War II. They do, of course, reveal the early influences on the composer's creative evolution and the growing strength of his musical personality, but they are also interesting for the way in which the range of genres and instrumental combinations they cover defined the limits of growth for almost the whole of Rachmaninoff's subsequent development: the concertos, symphonies and other works for orchestra, the operas, songs and instrumental pieces of his maturity all have precedents in his student years.

Rachmaninoff's progress through the conservatoire was effortlessly brilliant and unfaltering. At the premiere of his First Concerto he confidently overruled the conductor, the fearsome martinet Safonov, who happened also to be the conservatoire's Director; twice he was

granted special dispensation to bypass graduation regulations, as Scriabin was not; his graduation opera *Aleko* made his name famous overnight, and his music began to be published. In the history of Russian music only Glazunov had experienced such uninterrupted success so young, and at this stage in his life Rachmaninoff lacked the strength of character to cope with it. In his arrogance he was impervious even to constructive criticism from his elders and betters, whether from Arensky about *Aleko*, Rimsky-Korsakov about the First Suite for Two Pianos, or Taneyev about the First Symphony. Inevitably, sooner or later, nemesis was bound to strike. Just as he had cried like a spoiled child on finding his piano temporarily inaccessible when he wished to begin composing *Aleko*, so five years later he was psychologically devastated by the failure of the First Symphony. One wonders what Chaliapin made of him privately at this period, when they first met at the Mamontov Private Opera; the contrast between his own background of poverty, struggle and hardship and Rachmaninoff's easy success could hardly have been more stark.

Pampered from infancy by Grandmother Butakova, given free rein during boyhood by his parents after they were estranged, cosseted by friends and relations in his bohemian first years of manhood, Rachmaninoff had never needed, up to this point in his life, seriously to struggle, and this shows itself in the way in which works of the first period have a tendency to lapse into unsubtle dramatization and empty rhetoric, expressing emotions that seem contrived and not a direct reflection of personal experience. The *Elegiac Trio*, Op. 9, written as a memorial tribute to Tchaikovsky on his death in 1893, typifies this weakness: although the minor key is there and the appropriately sorrowful gestures, and although in this case the sincerity of feeling cannot be doubted, the overall effect is oppressive rather than moving. Other works of this period are facile and superficial (Piano Pieces, Op. 10), gushingly sentimental (*Élégie*, Op. 3, *Romance*, Op 10), or self-evidently not the product of any urgent internal creative need (Piano Duets, Op. 11). Some, however, are strikingly beautiful (certain of the songs), or show remarkable promise (*Aleko*); one of them (First Symphony) is a failed near-masterpiece.

The interim that followed the symphony's disastrous premiere marks the transition to Rachmaninoff's second and most productive period of composition. A comparison between works of similar genres composed before and after this time shows that the step forward in the quality of musical raw material transcends the development of technique that naturally went with it. For example, of the six piano *Moments musicaux* of 1896 Rachmaninoff himself played only one in public, the most effective, No. 2, in E flat minor; the five he disregarded, unmemorable and repetitive, have been all but ignored by other pianists too.[2] The

Preludes of 1903, on the other hand, have a much wider expressive range, more invention, more 'urge', and melodically are far more memorable (most notably those in G minor, B flat, D, E flat and G flat major). Similarly, the Second Suite for Two Pianos (1900–01) is much richer in material than its predecessor (1893), and the E minor Symphony (1906–08) is more affecting than the D minor (1895). In general it can be said that Rachmaninoff's later music explores depths of feeling touched earlier only in the best of the songs.

Rachmaninoff's enhanced powers of composition went along with an increased maturity and stability of character, helped, no doubt, by his marriage in 1902 to his cousin Natalya Satina. Artistic success and popular favour, both as composer and interpreter, resumed their brilliant course, a disagreeable if spurious rivalry with Scriabin, and bouts of melancholy self-doubt, casting occasional shadows. Although based in Moscow, but interrupting his career there for a three-year stay in Dresden in search of the peace and solitude he needed for composition, Rachmaninoff always found his greatest satisfaction and inspiration at Ivanovka, his wife's family's estate in Russia's southern steppe, where the majority of his output was either conceived or worked on. It was in these years that the composer wrote his most important music and the works most loved by the concert-going public and by which in the main his name lives today: the Second and Third Concertos, the Second Symphony, the bulk of the piano music and songs. Though no startling change in style can be observed over this period, after Rachmaninoff's return from Dresden a steady development did take place: the characteristically luxuriant lyricism begins to give way to a terser style, and there is a definite movement towards greater chromaticism in the writing. A comparison between the Preludes of 1910 and the two sets of *Études-Tableaux* (1911 and 1916), no less than between the two sets of songs, Op. 34 and Op. 38, immediately makes this clear. Another change of direction is the renewal of interest in religious music, hinted at before but at last coming to glorious fulfilment in two master-works, the *Liturgy* (1910) and the *All-Night Vigil* (1915).

In his professional career in the big cities Rachmaninoff was insulated from the harsh political and social realities of the Russia around him by the privileges of fame, and in his private world by life as a gentleman farmer. Ivanovka was Rachmaninoff's Cherry Orchard, a sanctuary in a maelstrom of change; thus, the boundary of his third and final period as a composer is marked by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Uprooting himself from his homeland, he had to find a new means of supporting his wife and two young daughters. The role he found, as a concert pianist, brought him even greater material prosperity than before but only, from the point-of-view of posterity, at a high price. The physical

links with the Russian land, people and culture, from which had come the stimulus to compose, were broken for ever, and his vital creative juices were somehow sapped by the pressures of a new career and an alien environment. The works of this period – only six major compositions in twenty-five years – reflect Rachmaninoff's changed circumstances and morale in exile. For all their many qualities and the abundant evidence they provide that his skill as a composer, far from diminishing in his last years, remained as masterly as ever, these works all lack something of the warmth of feeling so typical of his earlier, though not his final, Russian compositions. Qualities already hinted at in these last works are here much more evident: there are elements of brusqueness and astringency in the Fourth Concerto, austerity in the Three Russian Songs, emotional anaemia in the Corelli Variations; the *Paganini Rhapsody*, except for the famous Eighteenth Variation, is conspicuously unsentimental. The passages of bitter nostalgia in the Third Symphony and his swan-song, the *Symphonic Dances*, are backward glances at a vanished world.

In leaving Russia Rachmaninoff lost not only his sounding-board but also his pre-eminent place in his country's musical life. Abroad there was little incentive to compose, least of all when, in so short a time, he achieved a supremacy as an executant that was recognized throughout the musical world. Composers temperamentally different from him, such as Medtner and Gretchaninov, were able, even in exile, to add to the catalogue of specifically Russian music, such as songs and religious music, but not so Rachmaninoff. The Three Russian Songs (1926) were not original compositions, and the composer's only other attempts at song in the last twenty-five years of his life – three tiny sketches, two of which still await publication – were also merely arrangements. The one vocal recording in which he played the piano part was never issued commercially; the record company's apparent excuse, that there was no market for songs in an incomprehensible language like Russian,[3] must have been a powerful disincentive to further effort. As for church music, this was another area now closed to him because of its limited relevance and negligible potential audience abroad. The composition over a relatively brief period in Rachmaninoff's last years in Russia of his two major religious works, not to mention the sketching of two religious songs in the year before he left, perhaps hints that a blossoming interest in this direction may have been peremptorily stifled by the change in circumstances.

Apart from the Three Russian Songs, the kinds of work Rachmaninoff chose to write in exile are, without exception, international in appeal: a concerto, two sets of variations, two symphonic works, and some piano transcriptions, mostly of works by Austro-German composers who,

at least in his Russian years, would have seemed very unlikely candidates for Rachmaninoff to choose – Bach, Kreisler, Mendelssohn, Schubert. It is significant that, unlike the vast majority of his Russian works, neither the *Paganini Rhapsody*, the Third Symphony, nor any of the transcriptions bears a dedication; it is as though, outside of the Philadelphia Orchestra, his compatriot Medtner and friend Kreisler,[4] he had no-one for whom he could write but himself, but this was not enough. 'For seventeen years,' he said in an interview in 1933, 'since I lost my country, I have felt unable to compose. When I was on my farm in Russia during the summers, I had joy in my work. Certainly I still write music – but it does not mean the same to me now.'[5]

It is of course true that the pressures of a full-time career as a concert pianist severely limited the time and energy Rachmaninoff might otherwise have devoted to composition, and he often claimed that he could cope with only one activity at a time. Like Mahler before him, he had to relegate composition to the summer months only, but in the early years of exile he had to use that time to work up piano repertoire. Even when he had achieved a position of financial security and artistic pre-eminence in his new career, he continued to need to add to that repertoire and to recuperate from the strain of concertizing. There are many references in Rachmaninoff's letters to his exhaustion at the end of a season, and he grew impatient and dissatisfied with himself for not composing, looking for excuses for having neglected what he felt was the responsibility of a creative artist. Nevertheless, his heavy annual concert schedules must have been made with his own connivance, or even at his express request; indeed, he once went so far as to describe his concerts as his 'only joy'.[6] 'I think,' wrote Alfred Swan, friend of Rachmaninoff in the later years, 'that if the urge to compose had been stronger and the lure of the concert platform not quite so strong, he would have overcome all the obstacles.'[7] The uncompromising Medtner in private put the matter more bluntly: 'He prostituted himself for the dollar;'[8] but then the high priest guarding the sacred flame was bound to see Rachmaninoff's withdrawal from composition and his temporal success as no venial sin.

Rachmaninoff was painfully aware of his own predicament:

> Perhaps it is that I am lazy; perhaps the incessant practice and eternal rush inseparable from life as a concert artist takes too much toll of my strength; perhaps I feel that the kind of music I care to write is not acceptable today. And perhaps my true reason for adopting the life of an interpreter rather than that of a creator in recent years is none of these. For when I left Russia, I left behind me my desire to compose: losing my country I lost myself also. To the exile whose musical roots, traditions and background have been annihilated, there remains no desire for self-expression.[9]

There is a conspicuous lack of any mention of Rachmaninoff's self-imposed exile in his letters, and yet we know from the evidence of family and friends that the pain of the loss never left him. Although the wound could not be healed, it was periodically salved by contact with other Russians, but neither his continued association with Chaliapin, nor his contact with expatriate men of letters, such as the poet and novelist Ivan Bunin, nor his closer friendship with Medtner, acted as a creative catalyst. 'Perhaps no others can understand the hopeless home-sickness of us older Russians,' Rachmaninoff remarked in America in 1933;[10] 'even the air in your country is different. No, I cannot say just how.' But his predicament was no different from that of so many Russians abroad throughout history.

> The air of foreign lands does not inspire me, because I am a Russian, that is to say, the least suited man to be an exile, to be in an alien psychological climate . . . Look at those compatriots of mine who are living abroad; they are drugged with the air of their country. There's nothing to be done about it; they will never get it out of their systems . . . I must again immerse myself in the atmosphere of my homeland; I must once again see real winter and spring . . . I must hear Russian speech and talk to people of my own flesh and blood, so that they can give me back what I lack here, for their songs are my songs . . .[11]

It was Prokofiev who spoke these words, in the same year, 1933, and in a similar situation, but Rachmaninoff had just the same feelings.

The mark of Rachmaninoff's nationality is the most obvious single characteristic of his music. Rachmaninoff himself explained it very simply: 'I am a Russian composer, and the land of my birth has influenced my temperament and outlook. My music is the product of my temperament, and so it is Russian music.'[12] Ernest Newman put the point more forcefully:

> Superficially he is perhaps less national than the composers who coquet with Russian folk music. But in a deeper sense he is perhaps more national than they; his sombreness is the purest vintage of a wine that is to be found only in the more pessimistic of the Russian poets. He is more truly in the line of the pure Russian culture succession than Borodin or Rimsky-Korsakov, who often wrote as if Russian literature hardly existed.[13]

The peculiarly Russian quality of every bar Rachmaninoff wrote originates from within the music rather than being imposed from without by what Medtner dismissively used to call 'ethnographical trimmings'.[14] Rachmaninoff makes virtually no use of Russian folk music and yet, as Medtner again said, '[He] is so profoundly Russian himself that he has no need of folk music.'[15] Paradoxically, it is in the physiognomy of his lyricism that Rachmaninoff displays his nationality most obviously, particularly in the great, seemingly endless, arching melodies, which are so notable a feature of many of his works, from the 'big tune' in the last movement

of the First Symphony of 1895 all the way to the saxophone melody in the first *Symphonic Dance* of 1940. Such extended melodies have enormous emotional power, though at least for some they are not without an element of enervation that is perhaps a legacy of the Moscow in which Rachmaninoff grew to adulthood and spent so much of his musical life, an ambience of which the critic Sabaneyeff gave a graphic if overblown description:

> [Moscow] was an artistically bohemian milieu with a strong bourgeois colouring. Moscow musicians gave themselves up to life's amusements considerably more than the musicians of St Petersburg. The famous Moscow restaurants, the no less famous gypsy choruses, the atmosphere of continuous dissipation in which perhaps there was no merriment at all but, on the contrary, the most genuine, bitter and impenetrable pessimism – this was the milieu. Music here was a terrible narcosis, a sort of intoxication and oblivion, a going off into irrational planes. Drunken mysticism, ecstatic sensations against a background of profound pessimism permeating existence. It was not form or harmoniousness or Apollonic vision that was demanded of music, but passion, feeling, languor, heartache. Such was Tchaikovsky's music and such also the music of Rachmaninoff developed into.[16]

Certainly Rachmaninoff did not emerge entirely unscathed from this debilitating environment, and his music does reflect the melancholy soul of someone preoccupied with the darker side of life. Rachmaninoff felt himself old and done for long before his time. In his correspondence, even in his twenties, morbid unhappiness and melancholy are recurrent themes. In his mid-thirties, having achieved success in all three of his musical careers and with material prosperity and a happy family life, he chose Böcklin's 'Isle of the Dead' as the subject of a tone poem. Not yet forty he complained urgently of ageing,[17] and his outward demeanour, reflecting this mental state, caused some of his younger contemporaries to nickname him 'starík', 'the old man'. In 1923 he wrote to his secretary: 'I take pleasure in deducting the passing days from my life's account'.[18] In his fifties, as a wandering emigré, having at last decided to build a permanent home in Switzerland as some kind of substitute for his beloved Russian estate, whilst writing to his sister-in-law a first, cheerful report about the progress being made by the builders, he could not forbear remarking that he had thought of a place where he could be buried.[19] In his last decade the spectre of death became still more insistent, the loss of Chaliapin particularly affecting him; Mrs. Rachmaninoff has described how the macabre graveyard scene at the beginning of the film 'Frankenstein' drove the composer in terror from the cinema.[20]

In keeping with this sombre view of life, it is not surprising that the medieval plainchant from the Requiem Mass, *Dies irae*, insinuated its way, in some form or another, into so many of his compositions. Before

Rachmaninoff, it had been used as a death motif by Liszt in the 'Dante' Symphony and as the basis of his *Totentanz*, a work which Rachmaninoff himself both conducted and once played. It also appears in the last movement of Berlioz's 'Fantastic' Symphony, another work which Rachmaninoff conducted and one which made a special impression on him during his first visit to America in 1909, in rehearsal under Mahler.[21] Among Russian composers who used *Dies irae* are Mussorgsky and Tchaikovsky, the former in his *Songs and Dances of Death* and in *Night on the Bare Mountain*, which Rachmaninoff several times conducted, the latter most notably in the fourth variation of the finale of the Third Suite for Orchestra, and less overtly in the middle of the last movement of the Fifth Symphony, two other works in Rachmaninoff's conducting repertoire.

It is probably true to say that *Dies irae* figures more prominently in Rachmaninoff's work than in that of any other composer, alive or dead, and yet Rachmaninoff himself left no clue about the reason for his apparent obsession. Even as late as 1931 he seems to have had only a hazy knowledge of its origin and significance,[22] though this is not altogether surprising in view of the fact that *Dies irae* came from the tradition of the Catholic and not of the Orthodox Church. Although Rachmaninoff associated *Dies irae* literally with death in a number of his works, most notably *The Isle of the Dead* and *The Bells*, its outline often occurs, like a natural mannerism, even when there is no obvious extra-musical connection.

Rachmaninoff's fascination with *Dies irae* naturally implies that his philosophy of life must have been fatalistic, and yet, while this is certainly true, his fatalism did not express itself in a morbid terror at the inevitability of death – for whether in *The Isle of the Dead*, *The Bells*, or the *Symphonic Dances*, death brings release and peace – so much as in the poignant realization that all human happiness is ephemeral. Significantly, this truism is the message of his song *Fate*, written in the fallow period after the disastrous failure of his First Symphony, when all his hopes for his future as a composer had been dashed; but then, as twenty years later, when fate struck again and he lost his native land, Rachmaninoff found within himself the strength of will with which to fight back. Moreover, at least in his last works, he came to treat *Dies irae* with even a certain degree of insouciance. In both the final movement of his swan-song, the *Symphonic Dances*, and the coda of his previous work, the Third Symphony, the manner of its setting is buoyantly confident, as though Rachmaninoff had at last come to terms with the implications of the motto which had haunted him for so long.

The apparent preponderance of minor keys in which Rachmaninoff chose to write is not the unequivocal evidence of a one-tracked melancholy mind it at first seems, for although it is true that all three symphonies, four concertos and the *Paganini Rhapsody* are in the minor

key, not to mention fourteen out of seventeen *Études-Tableaux*, two sonatas for piano and one for cello and piano, one half of the Preludes and no fewer than thirty-four of the eighty-three songs in the Soviet collected edition are in the major key, and a further nine end that way. In his music as in his life Rachmaninoff could be slyly humorous (*Polka de W.R.*, *Paganini Rhapsody*), light-hearted (*Polichinelle*, *Oriental Sketch*), even exuberant (first movement of *The Bells*).

Although in his bohemian youth Rachmaninoff was probably little touched by the spiritual message of religion, the services in the cathedrals at Novgorod and St Petersburg, to which he was taken as a young boy by Grandmother Butakova, left an indelible mark on his music. The Orthodox Church laid down that, in order to avoid jarring intervals between adjacent notes, liturgical music should move by adjacent steps in the scale, and it is in the gently undulating contours of many of Rachmaninoff's most characteristic melodies – the mottoes of the Second and Third Symphonies, the opening themes of the Second and Third Concertos are but four of many examples – that its influence is most pervasive. The chanting of church choirs is imitated in the closing pages of both *Aleko* and the cantata *Spring*, and the ancient chants themselves provided the thematic material of the First Symphony. The composer's more serious view of religion in later life culminated in two major religious works of his own, and a passage from his *All-Night Vigil* was borrowed for use in the last of the three *Symphonic Dances*. But Rachmaninoff's consciousness was penetrated no less by the sound of church bells, which ring out in many of his compositions, whether written in Russia (First Suite for Two Pianos, Preludes, Op. 32, Second Sonata), Dresden (Second Symphony) or even Italy (*The Bells*).

Alongside the sounds of religion the incongruously contrasting music of gypsy singers also left a permanent impression on Rachmaninoff, as it did on so many Russian writers and musicians. The composer's friend Alexander Goedicke recalled how even in Rachmaninoff's daily life these two elements co-existed naturally:

> He loved church singing very much and quite often, even in winter, would get up at seven o'clock in the morning and hail a cab in the darkness, mostly to drive to the Taganka, to the Andronyev monastery, where he stood in the half-darkness of the enormous church through the whole of the liturgy, listening to the austere ancient chants from the *Oktoekhos*, sung by the monks in parallel fifths . . . It commonly happened that on the same evening he would go to a symphony concert . . . and then, more often than not, go on to have supper at the restaurant Yar or the Strelna, where he would stay late into the night, listening with great enthusiasm to the singing of the gypsies.[23]

These two elements, religion and gypsyism, can be heard juxtaposed in that pivotal work of Rachmaninoff's early career, the First Symphony.

The influence of gypsy music on Rachmaninoff is twofold. The element of pathos, heard in its most unrefined form in the overtly gypsy works, *Aleko* and *Gypsy Caprice*, but also in some of the early songs and piano music, becomes purified with time and assimilated into the composer's natural and deeper melancholy. It is interesting that in later life Rachmaninoff so much prized Chaliapin's recording of the popular song 'Black Eyes' precisely because of the affecting sob at the climax[24] – the feature above all others which epitomized the art of the gypsy singer. The other aspect of gypsy music that left its mark on the composer, its wild abandonment and excitement, is also heard in a raw and untamed state in the early works, such as the First Concerto, but more subtly and discreetly in the finales of the later concertos and symphonies.

Rachmaninoff's early works all proclaim their harmonic ancestry from Tchaikovsky, Arensky and Taneyev, but from the time of the Third Concerto (1909) hints began to appear in the more chromatic harmonies of the influence of the later compositions of Rimsky-Korsakov. Rachmaninoff's growing admiration for the composer was probably also responsible for the increased transparency of his orchestration in later years. In works of the first period it tends to be bright but unsubtle, and although the second period sees an added richness of sonority to complement the heightened emotional power of the music, in some places, as in the Second Concerto and Second Symphony, the textures tend towards denseness. Despite the still more massive orchestra used in *The Bells*, there is a welcome move in this work in the direction of greater clarity, which is yet more evident in the compositions of Rachmaninoff's last period, so that the third is the most transparently scored of all the symphonies, and the fourth orchestrally the least cluttered of the concertos.

In considering Rachmaninoff's style, it is important to remember that both domestically and musically he lived his life in a kind of ghetto. In his private world he was self-contained with his family and a small circle of friends, generally remaining aloof from social contact, whether at his isolated estate in southern Russia or back in Moscow, where his remoteness from everyday affairs allowed him to rewrite his First Concerto apparently oblivious even of the noise of the gunfire of revolution. The loss of his country in middle age and a change of career did not significantly change the manner of his private life after 1917 when, as a refugee, he was driven back still more on his powers of self-reliance. Musically he became even more isolated; except in his professional life, Rachmaninoff's meetings with other composers and performers were only casual social encounters and never occasions for serious musical discussion. The two well-documented meetings with Stravinsky in 1942 passed without a word spoken about their lives' main occupation, composition.[25] Even Medtner, whose work he admired so much, failed to break down the

barriers of reticence.[26] With a temperamental abhorrence of all contemporary music from Prokofiev on, Rachmaninoff remained stylistically almost impervious to the musical world of the twentieth century, though he was by no means unaware of what was going on around him.

In an interview he gave less than two years before his death Rachmaninoff affirmed his creed as a composer:

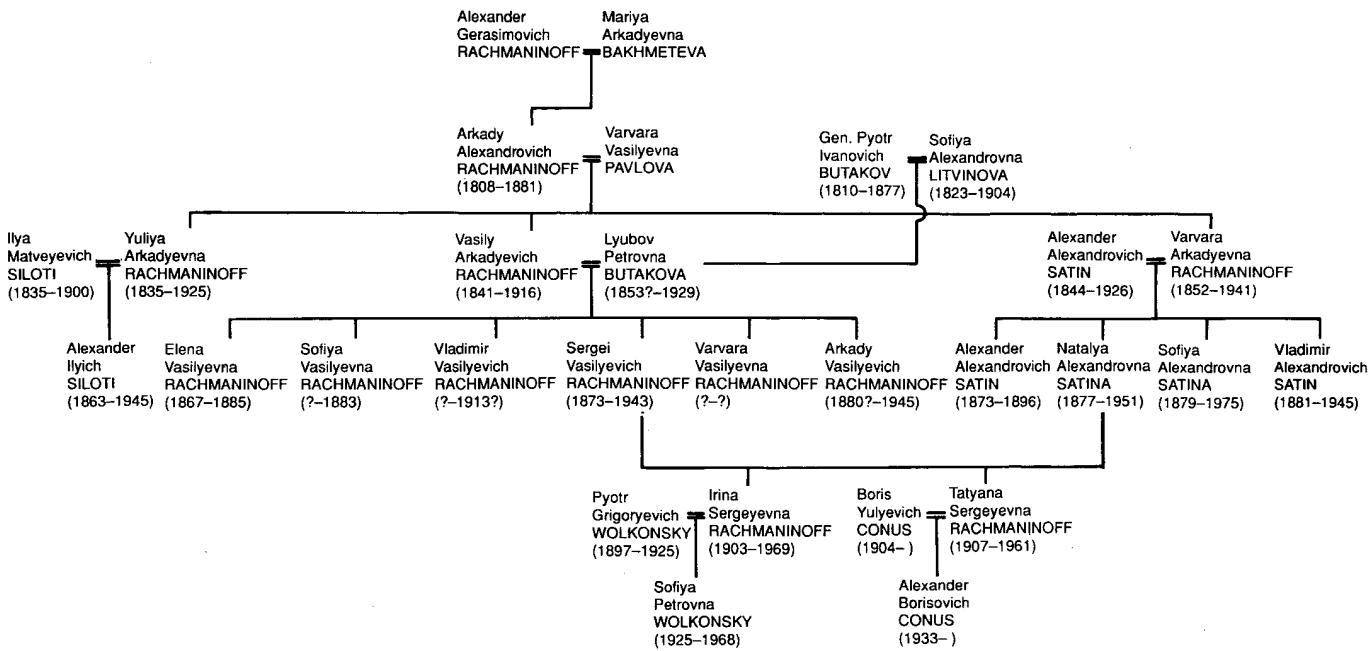
> Composing is as essential a part of my being as breathing or eating; it is one of the necessary functions of living. My constant desire to compose music is actually the urge within me to give tonal expression to my feelings, just as I speak to give utterance to my thoughts. That, I believe, is the function that music should serve in the life of every composer; any other function it may fill is purely incidental. I have no sympathy with any composer who produces works according to preconceived theories or with the poseur who writes in a certain style because it is the fashion to do so. Great music has never been produced in that way – and I dare say it never will. Music should, in the final analysis, be the expression of a composer's complex personality. It should not be arrived at mentally, tailor-made to fit certain specifications – a tendency, I regret to say, all too prevalent during the past twenty years or so. A composer's music should express the country of his birth, his love affairs, his religion, the books which have influenced him, the pictures he loves. It should be the product of the sum total of a composer's experiences. Study the masterpieces of every great composer and you will find every aspect of the composer's personality and background in his music. Time may change the technique of music but it can never alter its mission.[27]

Practising such a philosophy so far into the twentieth century Rachmaninoff may justifiably be considered the last important composer in the Romantic tradition. In the circumstances of his life it is not surprising that he had no students or protégés, nor that his influence on other composers has been virtually nil. His music is *sui generis* and, in that the composer's personality establishes itself unmistakably within only a few bars, it unquestionably deserves the epithet 'original', even if not in the profound sense that applies to the seminal works of greater masters, such as Mussorgsky or Debussy. Living to become a relic from the past in an alien world, Rachmaninoff continued to give expression to personal feelings in his compositions in an age when, after Stravinsky, emotion in music had become unfashionable if not taboo. 'Music must first and foremost be loved,' he once said;[28] 'it must come from the heart and it must be directed to the heart. Otherwise it cannot hope to be lasting, indestructible art.' In the years since Rachmaninoff's death his music has triumphantly proved its durability, and it is a measure of his considerable achievement that in a troubled and changing world his distinctive message continues to strike home to music lovers of all ages everywhere, with undiminished effect and relevance.

References

1 *Aleko*, the First Concerto, Op. 1, the *Prelude* and *Oriental Dance* for cello and piano, Op. 2, and three of the Six Songs, Op. 4.
2 Medtner and Horowitz occasionally performed *Moment musical* No. 3, in B minor; Moiseiwitsch, No. 4, in E minor; Richter, No. 6, in C major.
3 Sofiya Satina, *VR/A* 1, p. 73.
4 The Three Russian Songs and *Symphonic Dances* are dedicated to Leopold Stokowski and to Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Fourth Concerto to Medtner, the Corelli Variations to Kreisler.
5 R. interview with H.E. Wortham in *Daily Telegraph*, 29 April 1933.
6 *Swan*, p. 186.
7 Ibid., p. 180.
8 Medtner in conversation with Wilfrid van Wyck.
Medtner told Alfred Swan, 'If Rachmaninoff could only become a ne'er-do-well, if only for a short time, then he would again begin to compose. But he is tied hand and foot by his obligations; everything with him is measured by the hour.' *Swan*, p. 7.
9 'The Composer as Interpreter', R. interview by Norman Cameron in *The Monthly Musical Record*, November 1934, p. 201.
10 R. interview in *New York Evening Post*, 26 December 1933.
11 'Prokofiev, An Intimate Portrait', article by Serge Moreux in *Tempo*, No. 11, Spring 1949, pp. 5–9.
12 *Ewen*, p. 848.
13 Ernest Newman, quoted in *Hallé*, No. 117, 1960/61, pp. 11–12.
14 Nikolay Medtner, *VR/A* 2, p. 350.
15 Alfred J. Swan, *Russian Music*, John Baker, London, 1973, p. 172.
16 *Sabaneyeff*, pp. 105–6.
17 R. to Marietta Shaginyan, 8 May 1912.
18 R. to Yevgeny Somov, 27 January 1923.
19 R. to Sofiya Satina, 8 August 1931.
20 Mrs Rachmaninoff, *VR/A* 2, p. 320.
21 *Riesemann*, p. 160.
22 Conversation with Joseph Yasser, *VR/A* 2, p. 356; also quoted in *B/L*, p. 278.
23 Goedicke, *VR/A* 2, pp. 11–12.
24 See *B/L*, p. 233.
25 *B/L*, p. 374; Neil Turney: *The Unknown Country, A Life of Igor Stravinsky*, Robert Hale, London, 1977, p. 146.
26 *Swan*, p. 7.
27 *Ewen*, p. 804.
28 Ibid., p. 808.

The Rachmaninoff Family Tree



3 Student Years, 1886–1892

The case of Rachmaninoff helps to confirm the opinion of those who assert the importance of inheritance in the possession of musical gifts, for three generations of Rachmaninoffs on the composer's father's side were musically talented to an unusual degree. Rachmaninoff's great-grandfather Alexander Gerasimovich and his wife Mariya Arkadyevna, to whom the minor composer and Intendant of the Imperial Chapel Nikolay Bakhmetev (1807–1891) was related and who is said to have studied music 'with the best teachers of that time',[1] instituted a choir and orchestra on their Znamenskoye estate. Alexander Gerasimovich died young and Mariya Arkadyevna remarried, but the children of both marriages seem to have shared her musical talent. Her son, Arkady Alexandrovich Rachmaninoff, the composer's grandfather, was a devoted amateur musician, whose wealth deprived him of the necessity of turning his hobby into a profession. A pupil of John Field and a prolific composer of light piano pieces and songs, he played the piano every day of his life and often took part in charity concerts. Rachmaninoff dimly recalled once playing duets with him when he was four years old. The composer's father, Vasily Arkadyevich Rachmaninoff, was another enthusiastic pianist who may also have composed or at least improvised. One of his sisters wrote: 'He used to play the piano for hours, not familiar pieces but God knows what',[2] and Rachmaninoff himself carried away the mistaken impression that the polka by Franz Behr he had heard him play, and of which many years later he made a concert arrangement, the *Polka de W.R.*, was his father's own work. No-one, then, should have been altogether surprised when Rachmaninoff, like his sister Elena before him, showed a precocious talent in the family tradition.

Rachmaninoff's first music teacher was his mother. Despite being better placed than anyone to recognize her son's preternatural gift, she seems to have failed to do so, but when it was brought to her attention by the children's governess, she engaged a friend of hers who happened

also to be a student of St Petersburg Consevatoire, Anna Ornatskaya, to give formal piano lessons. When the amiably feckless Vasily Rachmaninoff had squandered his wife's fortune, the family moved to St Petersburg, and for three years from 1882 Rachmaninoff continued his studies on a scholarship at the conservatoire. Although he worked hardly at all, his idleness at first escaped detection. He spent his summer holidays with his Grandmother Butakova, and it is in the final two halcyon summers of 1884 and 1885, at Borisovo, her estate near Novgorod, that the first glimmerings of the nascent composer may be discerned, for we are told that he improvised at the piano to entertain guests and ascribed the pieces to famous composers.[3] When his laziness as a student at Petersburg had at last been exposed and his musical training urgently reassessed, he was sent to Moscow to become a full-time boarding pupil of the renowned piano pedagogue Nikolay Sergeyevich Zverev. In 1886, after the first year, Rachmaninoff and his two fellow 'cubs', Matvey Pressman and Leonid Maximov, were taken for the summer holiday to the Crimea, where they were given lessons in basic harmony by a young teacher from Moscow Conservatoire, Nikolay Ladukhin, whose tuition may have been instrumental in prompting Rachmaninoff's first essay at composition, an *Étude* in F sharp, two pages long, which has not survived. Pressman, to whom Rachmaninoff dedicated his piece, sets the event during the Crimean holiday; Riesemann, presumably reporting the memories of the composer himself forty-four years on, puts it in Moscow the next year.[4]

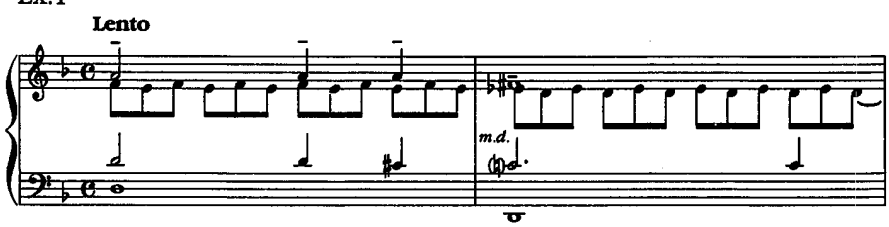
In the autumn of 1886 Rachmaninoff entered Arensky's harmony class at the conservatoire and soon, quite independently, began to study his first orchestral score – Tchaikovsky's 'Manfred' Symphony, premiered in Moscow just six months before. Out of admiration for the composer Rachmaninoff decided to make a four-hand piano transcription of the work, and when it was completed Zverev gave him the opportunity to play it (with Pressman) in Tchaikovsky's presence. Although this juvenile act of homage did not survive, Rachmaninoff's close involvement with the symphony at this time may in retrospect explain the occasional apparent echoes of it in his own music, and the last movement almost certainly provided the young musician with his first encounter with what was to become the *idée fixe* of his creative life, the plainchant *Dies irae.* Moreover, Tchaikovsky's symphony may well have sown the seeds for Rachmaninoff's own orchestral work on the same Byronic subject four years later, and the study of orchestral scoring may at least have prepared the way for his own next work.

The Scherzo in D minor for orchestra is Rachmaninoff's earliest dated composition, the title page of the autograph score bearing the date '5–21 February 1888', with the year 'corrected' in an unknown hand to

'1887',[5] which improbably places the work only two or three months after the composer's initiation into the mysteries of orchestration. The heading on the manuscript, 'Third Movement', suggests at first sight that the Scherzo was at one stage earmarked as part of an unrealized larger project, presumably though not necessarily a symphony, but it may have been added later, and not even by Rachmaninoff himself. The musical material is as unsophisticated and derivative as is to be expected at this stage, and there is no hint in it of any of the characteristic features of the mature composer. In overall conception the work is all too obviously indebted to the Scherzo from Mendelssohn's incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to stand by itself, and its main interest is its demonstration of the young composer's precocious ear for orchestral timbre.

The earliest surviving piano piece of Rachmaninoff is probably the so-called 'Song Without Words' in D minor, reproduced from memory by the composer in 1931 for Riesemann's biography and described there as one of ten written as an exercise for Arensky's harmony class at the end of the academic year 1886–87,[6] though the examination at the end of the course, at which Rachmaninoff played these pieces for Tchaikovsky, did not take place until a year later, in May 1888. Unlike the orchestral Scherzo, whose key it shares, far from having the Mendelssohnian overtones its title implies, the piece is imbued with Russian melancholy to a degree perhaps unnatural in a boy so young, though in retrospect this can be seen as a portent of the kind of emotional world the mature composer was to make so much his own:

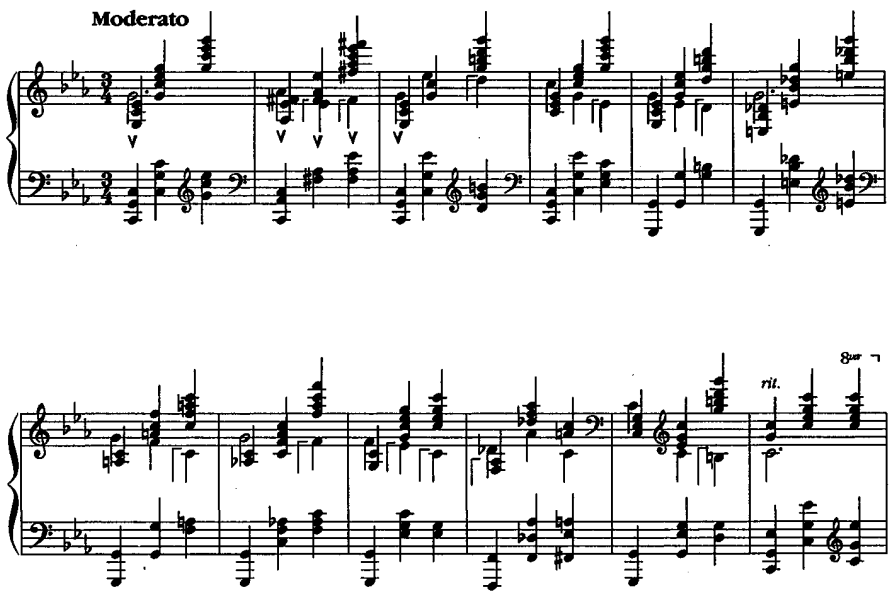
Ex.1



Rachmaninoff's next extant compositions – the three piano Nocturnes, written between November 1887 and January 1888 – mark a striking advance on this juvenile academic exercise, though the models used by the young composer are all too clearly visible in their musical material and pianistic style. The first, in F minor, long and rhapsodic in structure, belies its name by reflecting not Chopin but Tchaikovsky and Rubinstein in its pronounced Russian character; the chordal climax of its bravura middle section, on the other hand, recalls the end of the first movement of Brahms's Second Piano Sonata, though this is doubtless

fortuitous, as Rachmaninoff is most unlikely ever to have encountered the work.[7] The theme of the main section of the second, in F major, is reminiscent of the Intermezzo from Borodin's *Petite Suite*; whilst the third, in C minor, after an incongruous six-bar slow introduction, has an *allegro moderato* transition which thematically and pianistically re-processes Schumann. Like the other Nocturnes, though admirably written for the instrument, it is episodic, improvisatory and too long for its musical interest, but in its last and main part, before the music peters out (the last page of the manuscript is missing), Rachmaninoff succeeds in creating a genuinely tragic atmosphere. By any standards the depth of feeling expressed by a youth of only fourteen is surely astonishing, and Rachmaninoff's precocity must have severely startled an unsuspecting Zverev:

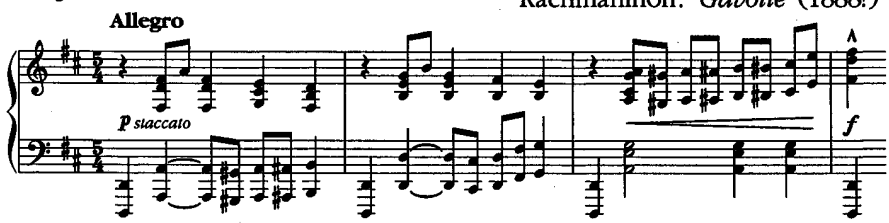
Ex.2



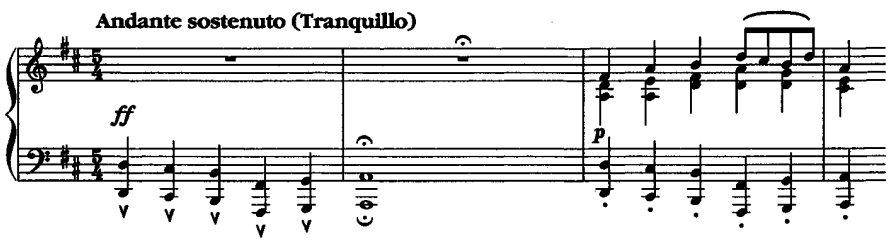
Another set of student piano pieces – *Romance, Prelude, Mélodie* and *Gavotte* – is also marked 1887 on the manuscript, though not in the composer's hand.[8] A later date is strongly suggested not only by the fact that Rachmaninoff himself at one stage thought them mature enough works to mark as his 'Opus 1', along with a group of songs positively dated 1889–90, but by the sheer extent of their musical superiority over the Nocturnes. Although there are growing hints of the individuality of

the adult composer, the influences still at work are undisguised. The *Romance* in F sharp minor is reminiscent of a Chopin nocturne in its melodic line, whilst the *Prelude* in E flat minor is somewhat melodramatic, in the manner of the early works of Rachmaninoff's conservatoire contemporary Scriabin, with a rapid triplet figure making a third voice in the middle section, pointing forward to the polyphony of the mature composer. The *Mélodie*, not only sharing the title but anticipating the key of its better-known cousin from Op. 3 of 1892, has a fragrant Tchaikovskian plaintiveness. The final *Gavotte*, in 5/4 time, is high-spirited, and its insistent tonic chords hammered home at the end provide another link with Op. 3, reappearing as they do in minor form in *Polichinelle*. The characteristically Arenskian metre invites the thought that Rachmaninoff's teacher may have been an influence here, in particular his well-known *Basso ostinato* from the set of piano pieces Op. 5, written only a few years before:

Ex.3a Rachmaninoff: *Gavotte* (1888?)



Ex.3b Arensky: *Basso ostinato*, Op.5, No.5 (1884)



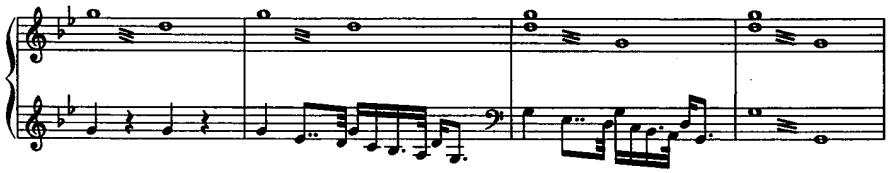
A composer who may just possibly be a distant influence on all these early pieces is the now forgotten Adolf Henselt (1814–1889), whose oratorical gestures, salon charm and melodramatic clichés, embodied most familiarly in two books of piano *Études*, so pleased nineteenth-

and early twentieth-century audiences. Since 1838 he had lived in St Petersburg, where he had become court pianist and earned a lucrative livelihood as a teacher. Zverev himself had been one of his pupils, and while there is no hard evidence that he singled out his teacher's music for the especial attention of his 'cubs', it was presumably at Zverev's suggestion that Rachmaninoff played Henselt's D major *étude* at a student concert in 1886. As more than thirty years later, when Rachmaninoff had taken up the career of a concert virtuoso, several items in his repertoire seem to have chosen themselves precisely because they were works he had played as a young student, his famous performance (and recording) of Henselt's *Si oiseau j'étais* may also reflect exposure to the composer during the years when his own early piano pieces were being written.

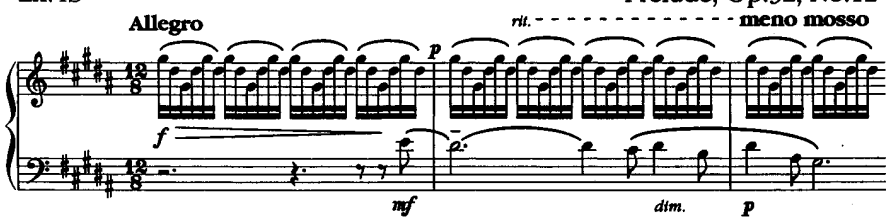
The only extant work that can be dated with certainty to the new academic year 1888–89 – though others that have not survived must surely have been attempted – is a six-page piano score of fragments from a projected opera set to an unidentified text based on Victor Hugo's dramatic novel *Notre Dame* and, like the setting Dargomyzhsky made of the same work in the 1830s, called *Esmeralda*,[9] after the gypsy girl rescued by Quasimodo. There is an introduction to Act 1, and sketches for three scenes from Act 3, dated 17 October 1888; an instrumental prelude followed by a recitative in which the priest, Claude Frollo (bass), tricks the old woman, Falourdelle (mezzo-soprano), into letting him look over her lodging house, where Esmeralda is to have an assignation with the rake Captain Phoebus; three lines of a theme evidently representing Frollo; and an entr'acte, probably depicting Notre Dame itself, in which for the first time in Rachmaninoff's music the ringing of bells sounds out clearly. There is nothing musically significant in any of these youthful sketches, but there is a surprising foretaste of the mature composer in the theme associated with Frollo, which unmistakably looks ahead to the Prelude in G sharp minor of 1910 (Ex. 4a and 4b).

In the spring of 1888 Rachmaninoff had moved on to the senior department of the conservatoire to continue his piano studies with his cousin Siloti, but in the end-of-year examinations in musical theory he was awarded the highest possible mark, a 5+, so effectively deciding for him that his future career in music would primarily be as a composer. Thus, in the autumn of 1889 he found himself joining Taneyev's class in counterpoint and Arensky's in harmony and orchestration.[10] Needing privacy for his work, he approached Zverev to ask for a room of his own, inexplicably prompting a furious argument.[11] Zverev arbitrarily severed relations, and a month later Rachmaninoff moved in with the Satin family, an event more momentous for his personal life than he

Ex.4a *Esmeralda*



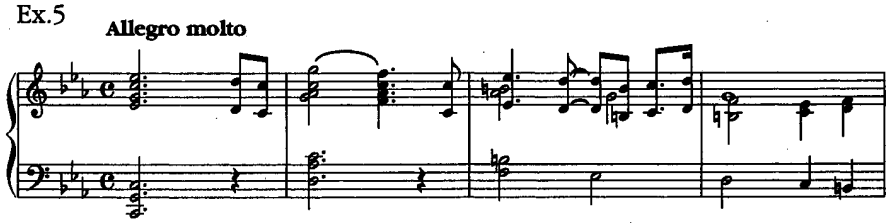
Ex.4b Prelude, Op.32, No.12



can ever have imagined at the time. It is interesting, if fruitless, to speculate on what might have been the outcome if at this stage in the life of the future composer and pianist he had acceded to his mother's request and returned to St Petersburg where, remote from Moscow and the orbit of Tchaikovsky and his followers, he might have studied composition with Rimsky-Korsakov and piano with Anton Rubinstein, who had resumed teaching at the conservatoire and whose pupil he might have become three years before Josef Hofmann.

In November 1889, about the time he joined the Satin household, Rachmaninoff set to work on a two-piano draft of the first movement of a piano concerto in C minor, which, however, he abandoned after a substantial fourteen pages. The opening theme is in the 'pathetic' vein of early Scriabin:

Ex.5



This is not far removed in mood from the opening of Rachmaninoff's 'official' First Concerto, in F sharp minor, begun only seven months later and demonstrating similar heroic gestures and youthful passion to these sketches. To judge from the numerous corrections and crossings-out, including no fewer than seven deleted pages of cadenza, the material

proved intractable and the scope of the project beyond the capacity of the as yet inexperienced sixteen-year-old composer.[12]

Also dated 1889, albeit in the 'unknown hand', are two quartet movements in simple ternary form: *Romance* and *Scherzo*. Although Rachmaninoff left the quartet in this incomplete state, the fact that he allowed a performance of a version for string orchestra at a student concert two years later seems to show that he cannot have thought too badly of the two movements as they stood. However, even in the catalogue of Rachmaninoff's student works the quartet is something of an oddity, and the apprentice composer is unlikely to have undertaken it except as an assignment from Arensky, just as it was almost certainly at the prompting of Taneyev that he made a second and final attempt in the medium seven years later. In both cases the restraint of the writing for the unfamiliar, if not for him alien, combination of four stringed instruments alone seems somehow to have effaced the composer's personality, and the contrast between the restraint and lack of enterprise in Rachmaninoff's chamber writing and the rich sonorities and flamboyant gestures of his later piano and orchestral textures is stark indeed. The *Romance* unfolds a melody of drooping Russian melancholy to contrast with a plaintive Tchaikovskian theme in the middle section, the muting of the four instruments nearly throughout adding to the whimpering effect. In the *Scherzo*, the opening theme, reminiscent of the piano Gavotte of two years before, has a certain attractive vigour, but the sombre trio section, with violin and viola solos accompanied unvaryingly by plucked strings, is grey and uninteresting. There is no mistaking the influence of Borodin in the turns of phrase in the brief coda.

In the spring of 1890 the composer made his first surviving choral setting, a six-part motet of only thirty-one bars to a Latin text, *Deus meus*,[13] composed in two days under examination conditions as a graduation test-piece in counterpoint. Although the work was awarded a top mark of '5', Rachmaninoff himself had a low opinion of it, later even going so far as to describe it as 'trash',[14] a judgement, it has to be admitted, only mildly unkind to what was never more that an arid academic exercise. The motet was nevertheless performed the next year by the conservatoire chorus under the baton of the composer, making his conducting debut.

Rachmaninoff spent the summer of 1890 at the Satin family estate of Ivanovka, situated 250 miles south-east of Moscow near Tambov, the regional centre, conveniently on the main railway line from Moscow to Saratov. This was his first visit to what was to become his beloved summer retreat and an irreplaceable source of spiritual refreshment over the next twenty-seven years.[15] Among the many guests were Rachmaninoff's cousins, the three Skalon sisters, with whom he enjoyed an adolescent flirtation, and it was to the youngest, the fifteen-year-old

Vera Skalon, for whom he later came to entertain deeper feelings, that he dedicated his gravely melancholic *Romance* in F minor for cello and piano, written in August and the very first piece in what was to become a long catalogue of Ivanovka compositions. Rachmaninoff may also have written a more extended companion piece for the same instruments at this time, or at least 1890 is the date assigned to what has been entitled '*Mélodie on a theme by S. Rachmaninoff*', an arrangement by the conductor Modest Altschuler of a theme on a manuscript given him by the composer but lost long before its posthumous publication. The major works begun this summer, however, were the First Piano Concerto, whose slow movement, it has been fancifully suggested,[16] may also have been inspired by Vera Skalon, and a four-hand piano transcription of Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*, Rachmaninoff's first paid musical commission, from the publisher Jurgenson. This work caused the young composer considerable trouble and had to be taken in hand by Siloti. Rachmaninoff's transcription, like others of its kind, languished even before the appearance of easily available gramophone recordings of the orchestral original made such versions redundant, though not before a commercial pianola roll had been made of the Waltz.

Returning in the autumn for the new term at the conservatoire, Rachmaninoff embarked on a suite based, like the Tchaikovsky symphony he had transcribed four years before, on Byron's 'Manfred'. We know from his correspondence with Natalya Skalon that the work made rapid progress and that by the beginning of January it had been orchestrated,[17] but all trace of it has unfortunately vanished. Indeed, outside of these letters there is no evidence for its ever having existed.

In 1890 and 1891 Rachmaninoff wrote two six-hand piano pieces for the Skalon sisters. The first, a brief *Waltz*, based on a theme composed by Natalya Skalon and dedicated to her, is no more than agreeable salon music, but the extended *Romance* of a year later is of a very different character, for this touching love song is the first example in Rachmaninoff's work of the kind of tender, lyrical outpouring that became characteristic of the mature composer. Moreover, it contains clear musical pointers to this later style, for not only is the introductory accompaniment figuration identical to the opening of the slow movement of the Second Concerto, written nine years later, in 1900–01, but a harmonic sequence in the coda was borrowed, not quite so literally, for the similarly named *Romance* of the Second Suite for Two Pianos, written at the same time as the concerto. It is interesting that some twenty years after the composition of these two pieces of juvenilia, when their existence was still known only to the dedicatees, the composer asked Natalya Skalon to return the manuscripts so that they could be destroyed, but the sisters kept them for sentimental reasons and the

works were published only after Rachmaninoff's death[18] Perhaps Rachmaninoff, by then married to the formidable Natalya Alexandrovna, feared that the existence of what might be seen as a youthful musical love letter might be a source of embarrassment; we can only guess. Originally, possibly in imitation of the layout of Arensky's well-known Suite for Two Pianos, Op. 15, recently premiered by Taneyev and Siloti, which comprised a Romance, Waltz and Polonaise, Rachmaninoff apparently likewise intended to add to his two pieces a concluding Polonaise to make a three-movement suite,[19] but this was never written.

Nine Rachmaninoff songs in all appear to have survived from the time when the composer was a student at Moscow Conservatoire. The three best were later incorporated in his first published group, Op. 4; the others remained unpublished during his lifetime.

	Date on MS or copy	*Text*
1 *At the gate of the holy abode*	29/ 4/1890	Lermontov
2 *I shall tell you nothing*	1/ 5/1890	Fet
3 *In the silent night* (Op. 4, No. 3)	17/10/1890	Fet
4 *April (C'était en avril)*	1/ 4/1891	Pailleron
5 *Twilight has fallen*	22/ 4/1891	Alexey Tolstoy
6 *Do you remember that evening?*	16/ 7/1891	Alexey Tolstoy
7 *Again you leapt, my heart*	–	Grekov
8 *Morning* (Op. 4, No. 2)	–	Yanova
9 *Oh stay, my love, forsake me not* (Op. 4, No. 1)	26/ 2/1892	Merezhkovsky

Just as the early set of four piano pieces had been earmarked as 'Opus 1', so the title page of a bound copy of the autographs of the first six songs in the State Central Glinka Museum of Musical Culture in Moscow bears the superscription by Rachmaninoff's student contemporary and life-long friend Mikhail Slonov 'Songs of S. Rachmaninoff, Op. 1'. In view of Rachmaninoff's attraction to the Skalon sisters, it is not suprising that all these early songs are about love, though mainly, and perhaps for the composer already characteristically, an unhappy or unrequited love.

The three earliest songs all show the youthful composer's indebtedness to Tchaikovsky. In *At the gate of the holy abode*, from a poem by Lermontov, the singer compares the situation of a beggar who, seeking alms, is offered a stone with his own position as a rejected lover.

Although the bitter melancholy of the lyricism reflects the general mood of the poem, Rachmaninoff's setting fails to throw light on any psychological detail. Fet's poem *I shall tell you nothing*, about a lover who will not declare his love but keeps his feelings to himself, had been set by Tchaikovsky himself four years before.[20] Rachmaninoff's superficially pleasant but somehow characterless version inevitably invites unfavourable comparison.

April is something of a curiosity in that it was set to a French text. Although we know from the *Recollections*[21] that Rachmaninoff became quite proficient in the language even in his childhood, and he was later to make settings of both German and Ukrainian poems in translation, this is the only song of his not set in Russian. The poem, by the satirical dramatist Édouard Pailleron (1834–1899), about a lover who recalls a fresh April day when he and his beloved embraced, had been published only two years before. In the song's posthumous publication it was given a Russian translation by V. Tushnova, in which it is now invariably performed. The vocal melody is rather anaemic, and the only point of significant musical interest is the falling harmonic sequence at the climax half way through, which repeats the formula used in the same place in *In the silent night*. The song loses nothing in its arrangement, in Soviet times, as a salon piece for violin and piano.

Next come two settings of poems by Alexey Tolstoy (1817–1875). In *Twilight has fallen* the poet tells how there came to him a vision of his beloved. Whilst fresh and attractive on its own account, the music adds nothing to the poem, and much the same may be said of *Do you remember that evening?*, recalling an occasion when two lovers rode in silence by the sea, their sorrows forgotten. Rachmaninoff himself was particularly and perhaps unnecessarily cutting about this song: 'It turned out very unsuccessfully . . . one of the least of my compositions . . . Believe me, dear Akimïch, as far as this song is concerned I became mildly desperate,' he wrote to Slonov, with characteristic self-depreciation.[22] The undated *Again you leapt, my heart*, to a poem by Nikolay Grekov (1810–1866), describing the passion inspired in the heart of a lover, is also almost certain to be another of Rachmaninoff's earliest songs, judged purely on musical grounds, though the physical evidence of the ink and paper of the autograph suggests a date of 1893.[23] However, the unvarying right-hand quaver chords of the piano part throughout the whole piece (evidently representing the heart palpitating), the unsubtle gestures of the vocal line and the harmonies characteristic of Rachmaninoff's years at the conservatoire all proclaim this to be the work of the apprentice composer.

Rachmaninoff was later clearly right not to publish the six student songs he chose to withhold, and there is no evidence that any of them

was ever performed even at student concerts. At the time of their composition he had insufficient experience of life or culture to enable him to make more than a superficial and generalized response to the words of his texts. Thus, while the songs reveal a natural feeling for the voice, and the piano accompaniment is invariably idiomatic, if unsophisticated and not very interesting, the music itself, though often beautiful, too easily inclines towards choking sentimentality (*At the gate*) or factitious melodrama (*I shall tell you nothing*), and it rarely illuminates the poems chosen for setting.

There is one other setting to be appended to this early group – an arrangement for voice and piano of the folksong *The Barge Haulers*, dated 10 September 1891 and dedicated to a piano teacher at the conservatoire, Adolf Yaroshevsky (1863–1910). The melody comes from a Russian folk music collection published twenty-one years before.[24] The simple text tells, with much repetition, how the barge-haulers shout and pull throughout the autumn night, straining their necks against the east wind. Unpublished during the composer's lifetime, Rachmaninoff's arrangement became available briefly in a Soviet edition of 1944 but, being omitted from the later Collected Edition, is generally unknown. In much the same vein as *The Volga Boat Song*, it must have made a fine vehicle for Chaliapin, who is said to have sung it to the composer's accompaniment more than once.

Russian Rhapsody

After completing the orchestration of his 'Manfred' Suite, Rachmaninoff wrote to Natalya Skalon on 10 January 1891 that he had begun a piece for two pianos he wanted to play later that week with Siloti. This was his *Russian Rhapsody*, completed with typical Rachmaninoff facility four days later [25] and subsequently given its one and only public performance in the composer's lifetime at a student concert the following October, by Rachmaninoff and Joseph Lhevinne. With two such astounding technicians at the keyboard it is curious that the manuscript has a number of simplified variant readings by the composer, and that the second part is distinctly subservient to the first. The Rhapsody is really a set of eight variations (the *Paganini Rhapsody*, forty-three years later, was to be similarly misnamed), and it may have been prompted by a visit Rachmaninoff and some student contemporaries made to a Moscow piano factory, recalled many years later by Rachmaninoff's friend Vladimir Wilshaw.[26] While trying out one of the instruments, Yury Sakhnovsky strummed a Russian song, to which Rachmaninoff, on another piano, responded with a variation on it; Sakhnovsky answered in kind, and