A as a youngster, Sergei Rachmaninoff enrolled on scholarship at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, but he proved so indifferent a student that the school threatened to curtail its support. At that point his cousin, the pianist Aleksandr Ziloti, stepped in to provide a measure of discipline that Rachmaninoff’s parents and professors had not managed to instill. He swept his promising but unfocused kinsman off to the preparatory division of the Moscow Conservatory and enrolled him in the piano studio of the famously strict Nikolai Zverev. It did the trick, and gradually Rachmaninoff started making good on his talent. Soon he transferred to the senior division of the Conservatory, into Ziloti’s own piano studio.

By the time he graduated, in 1892, Rachmaninoff was deemed worthy of receiving the Great Gold Medal, an honor that had been bestowed previously on only two students, Sergei Taneyev and the now-forgotten Arseny Koreshchenko. He nonetheless grappled with challenges as he tried to forge his path as a composer; the ridicule that greeted the unveiling of his Symphony No. 1 in 1897 brought him to a standstill. His talent was such that, in the psychological aftermath of his embarrassing public failure, he simply turned to a different musical pursuit and focused on conducting for the next few years. Eventually he sought the help of a physician who was investigating psychological therapy through hypnosis, and by 1901 Rachmaninoff was back on track as a composer. A few years later he would add the obligations of a touring concert pianist to his schedule, and his numerous recordings reveal that his outstanding reputation as a performer — refined, precise, impressive of technique and analytical of approach — was fully merited. He composed four piano concertos over the course of his career and was the soloist at the premiere of each. A pendant to these is a fifth, ever-popular work for piano and orchestra, the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini (1934). Of the bunch the plush Second Concerto and the knuckle-busting Third, along with the Rhapsody, have staked indelible places in the repertoire. The Third, in fact, has earned a reputation as one of the most technically daunting of all the standard piano concertos, and pianists have often cited it as a sort of Everest they feel compelled to vanquish, no matter the colossal effort required. Rachmaninoff himself maintained that his Third Concerto was “more comfortable” to play than his Second. Perhaps it proved so for Rachmaninoff, whose hands individually spanned the interval of a thirteenth and whose keyboard stamina was apparently limitless, but it assuredly was not more comfortable for most.

### In Short

**Born:** April 1, 1873, in either Oneg or Semyonovo, Russia  
**Died:** March 28, 1943, in Beverly Hills, California  
**Work composed:** 1909; dedicated to the pianist Josef Hofmann  
**World premiere:** November 28, 1909, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928) and the composer as soloist  
**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** July 24, 2019, at Bravo! Vail in Colorado, Bramwell Tovey, conductor, Yefim Bronfman, soloist  
**Estimated duration:** ca. 44 minutes
other pianists. It was even out of reach of the great Josef Hofmann, whom Rachmaninoff admired above all other pianists and to whom he dedicated this score; Hofmann had considerably smaller hands, and as a result he never was able to perform this concerto that bears his name at the top of its first page.

Rachmaninoff composed this concerto for his own use, and specifically for his debut North American tour, which he undertook in 1909 with trepidation, since he had devoted the preceding three years to composing rather than performing. Nonetheless, he did not stint in crafting this work to show off his dizzying pianist skills to great advantage, and his ever-increasing experience as a composer yielded a work in which the solo and orchestral parts are melded with remarkable sophistication. That was not readily apparent to the New York critics who attended the premiere; they were all but unanimous in finding Rachmaninoff’s Third Concerto vague and meandering in comparison to his Second, which by

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**About the First-Movement Cadenza**

Although the first and third movements of Rachmaninoff’s Third Piano Concerto contain cadenzas and the second sports a brief cadenza-like passage for the soloist, the first movement poses a special problem to the interpreter. Rachmaninoff composed two versions of the extensive first-movement cadenza, reflecting different ways of getting into and back out of a fully packed section common to both. The shorter version makes a more subtle transition from the preceding material, beginning softly, and gradually swelling in volume as fragmented melodic motives emerge at the top of the texture:

The longer version launches right in — forte swelling to fortissimo, though quickly retreating to piano — with the sort of powerful, full-textured chords that will characterize both cadenzas in their shared section.

Rachmaninoff seems always to have played the shorter version, and that became the standard practice in the first half-century of the work’s existence. But the longer cadenza became popular when it was championed by the pianist Van Cliburn in the wake of his triumph at the 1958 International Tchaikovsky Competition, and since that time it has largely displaced the first version in popularity. It is this longer version that Denis Matsuev has chosen to play in this performance. Either is obviously sanctioned by the composer.
Sergei Rachmaninoff’s relationship with the New York Philharmonic began in 1909, during his first American tour. The composer performed the World Premiere of his Piano Concerto No. 3 on November 28 of that year with the New York Symphony (which later merged with the Philharmonic). He played the concerto again in New York just two months later, this time in his debut with the Philharmonic, conducted by then-Music Director Gustav Mahler. The concert program noted that the concerto had been completed only a week before the composer’s departure for America, and that the score was still in manuscript; the conductor was using the autograph.

The New York Times review, with the ho-hum headline “The Philharmonic Again,” proclaimed the program “contained no new novelties,” but added that the favorable impression the concerto had made in its premiere had deepened: “it is more mature, more finished, more interesting in its structure, and more effective than Rachmaninoff’s other compositions in this form.” Subsequent pianists, daunted by the reputation of Rachmaninoff’s Third Concerto, may take heart in the reviewer’s opinion of the composer’s performance:

It was felt by many yesterday, as it had been at the first performance of the work, that many another pianist could play it better than the composer. However, Rachmaninoff gave it a sympathetic reading, if lacking in some of the brilliancy which parts of the work demand. The orchestra played a fine accompaniment. The audience recalled the composer several times.

Rachmaninoff returned to perform his Third Concerto with the Philharmonic several more occasions through 1932, playing it a total of 16 times.

— The Editors

The New York Philharmonic Connection

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