

## Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

### PIANO CONCERTO NO. 1 IN F SHARP MINOR, OP. 1 (1891 rev. 1917)

- I. VIVACE
- II. ANDANTE
- III. ALLEGRO VIVACE

In 1891, at the age of 18, Rachmaninov won the highest honours for his piano playing at the Moscow Conservatory, after studying with Alexander Siloti, who himself had studied with Tchaikovsky, Nicholas Rubinstein and Liszt. In addition, as a student of composition with Taneyev and Arensky, he had written a number of works in different genres, before feeling able to give one of his compositions an opus number. This was to be the First Piano Concerto, by far his most ambitious work to date. The last two movements were written in a rush during July 1891 while still a student: as Rachmaninov himself wrote to a friend, 'I could have finished it much sooner, but after the first movement I idled for a long while...composed and scored the last two movements in two and a half days.'

Dedicated to Siloti, the Concerto was first performed at the Moscow Conservatory the following year, in March 1892, with Rachmaninov as soloist and Safonov conducting. The reception was not especially enthusiastic. Rachmaninov was disappointed but not as devastated as he was to be following the disastrous premiere of his First Symphony in 1897. The weak performance, conducted by Glazunov, and a vitriolic review by Cui, precipitated the depression for which Rachmaninov needed medical assistance, and the product of which was to be the Second Piano Concerto, first performed in 1901.

Following the success of the Second Concerto Rachmaninov received many requests to hear the First, but he was very reluctant to place it before the public. By 1908 however he was definitely planning 'to take it in hand, look it over, and then decide how much time and work will be required for its new version, and whether it's worth doing anyway.' Intensive work on the revision of the Concerto did not however start until the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in 1917, when Rachmaninov was in Moscow. He later described this time: 'I had started to rewrite my First Piano Concerto... I was so engrossed with my work that I did not notice what went on around me... I sat at the writing table or the piano all day, without troubling about the rattle of machine guns and rifle shots.'

As the Revolution progressed Rachmaninov realised that life in Russia was changing beyond recognition.



Rachmaninov c.1900

He was offered a series of concerts in Scandinavia in November 1917 and decided to leave Russia with his family, for what in fact was to be for ever. From Scandinavia he travelled to America, and in urgent need of funds, he considered re-launching his career there either as a conductor or as a pianist. On the advice of Josef Hofmann he chose the latter, and was to be one of the world's finest concert pianists for the rest of his life, until his death in Hollywood in 1943. The First Piano Concerto, in its now revised form, was first performed soon after his arrival in America, on 28 January 1919 in New York, with Rachmaninov as soloist and Modeste Altschuler conducting the Russian Symphony Orchestra.

Rachmaninov was very pleased with his revision of the Concerto, commenting '...it is really good now. All the youthful freshness is there, and yet it plays itself so much more easily.' He had tightened the construction of the work, and had given the orchestration, over which he had originally hurried, greater clarity. The **first movement** opens with an arresting brass fanfare, followed by a rapid solo passage of descending octaves and weighty chords from the piano, indicating the influence of Tchaikovsky, who had supported Rachmaninov as a young composer. The orchestra then introduces the first theme, which is taken up by the soloist. There is a second theme, marked *meno mosso*, and the opening plays a part in the working out of the thematic material, notably in the extended cadenza for the solo piano.

The **slow movement** has been compared to a Chopin *Nocturne*. It is quite short and the piano enters almost at once, with an expressive melody, which is developed with increasingly elaborate and complex figuration. The **final movement** opens in 9/8 time: this is contradicted in the second bar by the piano's quadruple-time 12/8. The pattern of contrasting metres continues, before the excitement of the opening gives way to a more tranquil central section in E flat that is marked *Andante ma non troppo*. The original mood and key of F sharp major are gradually restored as the Concerto moves towards its final optimistic conclusion.