



scherzo, a piano concerto and even a projected opera.

The non-stop regime of piano practice in the Zverev household soon made composition impossible for Rachmaninov. The matter came to a head in 1889 and Zverev severed all relations with his protégé. The move was prescient; although Rachmaninov established himself as a pianist of world-class standing it was, henceforth, composition that would be his first concern. The first major work to emerge from this newly-formed dedication was the First Piano Concerto. In March 1891 he wrote to Natalya Skalon, one of his closest confidants, "I am now composing a piano concerto. Two movements are already written." Then, in July, he told another friend, "I wrote down and orchestrated the last two movements in two-and-a-half days. You can imagine what a job that was! I wrote from 5 o'clock in the morning until 8 o'clock in the evening, so I was terribly tired when I finished work".

Rachmaninov premiered the concerto's first movement at a student concert on 17 March 1892. However, in the years that followed he became increasingly discontented with its thick orchestration and foursquare piano writing. Only in October 1917 did he finally revise the work, surrounded by the turmoil of the October Revolution raging around his Moscow flat. It was symbolic that the revisions of this opus 1 should be the last work he completed in Russia; by December Rachmaninov had left Russia forever.

The revisions were radical without sacrificing the youthful freshness of

the work. Rachmaninov brought a new economy to the orchestral textures and tightened the musical argument, particularly in the third movement. The revisions though did not result in greater public interest in the concerto and Rachmaninov complained to his publisher, "when I tell them in America that I will play the First Concerto, they do not protest, but I can see by their faces that they would prefer the Second or Third."

The concerto is cast in the usual three movements. The first (*Vivace*) opens with a fanfare followed by a rhetorical flourish for the piano, not unlike the opening of the Grieg or Schumann concertos. This gives way to a lyrical secondary theme which, even at this early age, is easily identifiable as the composer's individual voice. The second movement (*Andante*) is a short nocturne with an expressive melody for the piano. The third movement (*Allegro Vivace*) is full of colourful excitement generated by the contrasting metres of 9/8 and 12/8, relieved by a tranquil central section and closing optimistically in the key of F# major.

**CD:** Vladimir Ashkenazy (piano), London Symphony Orchestra / André Previn. Decca 444 839-2DF2 (part of a two-CD set of all four concertos at bargain price)

**CLASSIC RECORDING:** Sergei Rachmaninov (piano), Philadelphia Orchestra / Eugene Ormandy (rec. 1939-40). Naxos 8.110602

#### SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873-1943)

For the last twenty-five years of his life Rachmaninov lived in exile in America