

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

Born into a wealthy family that owned an estate in Semyonovo, southern Russia, Rachmaninoff was encouraged by music-loving relatives to learn the piano from an early age. After his father squandered his finances, the family moved to St Petersburg and Rachmaninoff's parents separated. Despite these difficulties, the young Rachmaninoff pursued piano lessons at the St Petersburg Conservatoire, prioritising music at the expense of his academic studies.

Rachmaninoff later transferred to the Moscow Conservatoire, where he wrote a one-act opera (*Aleko*) as his graduation piece; he already had a piano concerto and a symphonic poem under his belt. As a young man, he earned money from teaching and from touring as a pianist. The failure of his First Symphony, thanks to a poor first performance conducted by the composer Alexander Glazunov, prompted a three-year period of depression and intense self-criticism, and he abandoned composition in favour of conducting. Undergoing a course of hypnosis and psychological therapy eventually gave Rachmaninoff the confidence to return to composition, and the warmly received Piano Concerto No 2 marked a full return to musical productivity.

In 1904, now a married man with a daughter, Rachmaninoff took up the position of conductor at the Bolshoi Theatre, which gave him the opportunity to stage two of his own operas. In 1906, he moved his family to Dresden for three years, also visiting Paris, and in 1909–10 undertook a tour of the United States, as both a pianist and conductor. Further European travels followed throughout the prewar years, with Rachmaninoff periodically returning to Russia, where he had been appointed conductor of the Philharmonic Society of Moscow. The turmoil of the Russian Revolution in 1917 prompted Rachmaninoff to look for opportunities to emigrate: a concert tour of Scandinavia offered a pretext to relocate to Copenhagen, and in 1918 the Rachmaninoffs moved to New York.

A busy program of concert tours of the US and Europe and in due course a recording contract made Rachmaninoff a wealthy man. His productivity as a composer slowed in this new environment, but he found renewed inspiration spending summers in Switzerland in the 1930s.

In 1942, now suffering from multiple health complaints, the composer moved his family to Beverley Hills, seeking a warmer climate for therapeutic reasons. The following year, Rachmaninoff was found to be suffering from an aggressive cancer and he died in his Californian home at the age of 69.