

Rachmaninov – Piano Concerto No.3 (Rachmaninov himself) 1940

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I. Allegro ma non troppo II. Intermezzo III. Finale, alla breve Sergei Rachmaninov – piano
Philadelphia Orchestra Eugene Ormandy – conductor Recording date: 4 December 1939 and
24 February 1940

Rachmaninov premiered the Third Concerto in New York with the New York Symphony Orchestra, led by Walter Damrosch, on November 28, 1909. The following January he played it with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Gustav Mahler. For many decades, it was neglected by pianists and public alike, in favor of the more compact, more tuneful and structurally sounder Second Concerto. It is a deeper work, full of virtuosic hurdles and lengthy cadenzas. But it was undermined by cuts Rachmaninov was prevailed upon to make, which, in the short run, served to make it more programmable in concerts, but ultimately sabotaged its artistic value. Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, however, most performances of the concerto have been of the original version, which can run around 45 minutes. (Abridged renditions shaved as much as ten minutes off the score's total timing.)

The Third Concerto's first movement, marked *Allegro ma non tanto*, opens with the piano delivering a lively but solemn theme of Russian character, which then immediately begins to sprout new ideas. A yearning bridge passage leads to a rhythmic theme that slows and quickly takes on another melodic guise, a beautiful and typically Rachmaninovian one in its soaring and ecstatic manner. The main theme returns and a powerful development section yields to a lengthy cadenza, whose opening pages offer alternative versions for the soloist -- a lighter, more athletic beginning or a darker more chordal one. A restatement of the main theme and brief coda close this generally subdued and reflective movement.

The second movement *Adagio* is formally rather unique, with the main theme dominating most of the movement, and a brief scherzo-like section appearing near the end. The mood ranges

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from the melancholy of the main theme by the oboe to the ecstatic glory of its big restatements by piano and orchestra in the middle part of the movement. After the playful scherzo-ish music, the piano is given a brief but brilliant cadenza that leads directly into the colorful finale.

This movement, marked *Alla breve*, offers a typical Rachmaninov fast theme on the piano right off: it is related to the first movement's alternate theme and is rhythmically buoyant and catchy in its repeated notes. A rhythmic chordal passage harkens back to the rhythm heard at the concerto's outset, and a lovely theme, related to the first movement bridge passage, is presented, hinting at triumphant resolution. Following a dramatic, suspenseful buildup near the end the theme makes one final and absolutely triumphant appearance, after which the brilliant coda closes the work. The middle section of this movement recalls both main themes from the first movement and was once the most heavily cut section of the concerto.

Today, this concerto carries the nickname of "Rach 3," and is the most popular choice among piano competition candidates wanting to perform a virtuoso display piece. --- Robert Cummings, Rovi

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